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## **Doing gender – doing family. Young people’s transitions into parenthood under an agency perspective**

### **Introduction**

This paper discusses some core findings regarding young women’s and men’s transitions into parenthood from the European Research Project UP2YOUTH – Youth as Actor of Social Change (see [www.up2youth.org](http://www.up2youth.org)). The core perspective of this project is agency – understood as a concept which takes into account the dialectic interplay of context conditions and individual strategies; this will be illuminated in the first section.

Within such an agency perspective, the *decision-making processes* of young women and men (including postponement or renouncing to children) and the *management* of young parenthood get into the focus of research interests. Both topics include negotiation processes in different dimensions – within gender relationships, within intergenerational relationships, and within work relationships, e.g. when new concepts of fatherhoods and motherhoods have to be defended towards employers. Our project has collected research findings on crucial factors within these negotiation processes, which will be shortly presented in the second section.

Some of these issues are explored comprehensively, for some others we have only spurious insights. They all point to transitions into parenthood as a highly gendered project, partly reproducing well-known patterns, but partly also representing new solutions young women and men are developing. Tasks for further gender-sensitive research on the topic will be sketched in the concluding section of this paper.

### **1. The concept of agency**

In the UP2YOUTH-project, we basically started from the diagnosis of de-standardised transitions into adulthood: in this diagnosis, agency comes into the focus as a necessity caused by structural distortions of the whole life-course (de-standardisation, Hurrelmann 2003): *because* transitions from youth to adulthood do not any longer (if they ever did) proceed in a smooth and foreseeable way, *because* these transitions are highly fragmented and above all: individualized (in terms of an increasing individual responsibility for success or failure within these transitions), they need to be managed by individual agency. Coming from this analysis, agency from the beginning is an issue of structured intentionality: it includes a

considerable part of structural forces, without neglecting the subjectivity of its actors, means: young women and men themselves – who then turn out to be actors of social change.

*The problem* is, that in youth research (as well as in youth policy), this difficult topic of agency is not adequately represented: while in late modern de-standardised transitions agency at the same time is an issue demanded by society as it is longed for by individuals, it seems to be difficult to thematise agency exactly in this ambivalence. Instead, a non-reflexive picture of youth again and again is breaking through, which can be identified in at least three versions: *first*, as soon as structure-related perspectives are dominating, young people appear as victims of social constraints, forced to react in ways which themselves cause problems, because of not fitting into the normalities still expected by those societal actors and institutions which are decisive for their transitions into adulthood – e.g. as gatekeepers into transitions to qualified work. Such a perspective is far from capturing the complex reality of young people's every day coping, and at the same time far less from capturing their potentials as actors of social change: young people are 'doing' social integration on the basis of daily routines and practices, they are actively coping with structural demands, they are inventing new solutions for these demands. By doing this, they – as could be argued – are "doing difference" (West & Fenstermaker 1995) in terms of reproducing social ascriptions regarding social origin, ethnicity and gender – but perhaps they are doing difference differently, i.e. modify such ascriptions, or break them off.

*Second*, as a kind of counter tendency, a rational choice-bias could be found in perspectives in which young people are regarded predominantly as calculators. Such approaches are ignoring structural constraints and necessities to the same amount as they overlook biographical processes, in which motivation and will are no freely available resources but are embedded in histories of de-motivation or encouragement. They are to be found in psychological approaches to "volition", they are implied in activation policies, in which positive incentives are replaced by sanctions, and they are implicit in any idea of an opportunity cost-driven agency, as can be found in discourses around family formation. This perspective is far too short-sighted, as could be shown in the overview work of Burkart (2002), and also in the demographic analysis of Fahey & Spéder (2004). Of course young people – as soon and as long as they are free to decide – are reasonable enough to weight their options and facilities for raising children before they get children, but even the more differentiated concept of rational choice – the RREEMM (Restricted Resourceful Expecting Evaluating Maximising Man) including also non-rational subjective and normative dimensions

(Esser 1996) cannot fully explain fertility behaviour<sup>1</sup>. Instead, it is important to keep in mind that there is never a completely free space in which young people would get rid from hierarchical structuration.

In this regard, also a *third* strand of youth research appears as too simplistic: the one which is celebrating young people's creativity and resistance, e.g. in the field of youth cultures, where young people appear as "heroes" or as "creators", but also in the field of young parenthood, where new trendsetters in high mobile dual career couples are celebrated. This perspective is neglecting "*the subtle relations of power*" at play within youth cultural phenomena (Thornton 1997:201), and more generally: within all youthful engagement. These three versions of simplification indicate the challenge for youth research, especially when it comes to gender questions: young people are neither victims, nor calculators, nor free creators – instead, they enfold their agency in between such ascriptions, performing mixtures of such roles, and it would be an empirical question how these mixtures would look like in different situations and under different conditions.

We therefore had to look for concepts of agency which are reflexive, and which take into account

- a *temporal dimension* of these agentic processes, in which past, present, and future intermingle; This perspective at the same time is considering the *processuality* of agency (Strauss 1993; Emirbayer & Mische 1998),
- a *biographical perspective*, in which processuality and temporality are included in (Schütze 2003), as they are included in career-concepts such as *learning careers* or *motivational careers* (Walther et al., 2006),
- an *interaction dimension*, because all decisions relating young parenthood are to be seen in a context of at least 2 individuals,
- a perspective which is considering the *body* as highly relevant for agency (thus qualifying intentionality) – an issue which is extremely relevant in youth research, because young people are the age group most engaging in bodily expressions, especially in terms of negotiating gender identities,
- an *interrelation between means and goals* of agency,
- a dimension of *social change*, which in our topic always is related to challenges for and revisions of gender concepts. Individual agency actually contributes to social change, not only in an intentional way but also as a side-effect of following personal

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<sup>1</sup> This finding is confirmed on a policy level: as Kröhnert & Klingholz (2008) could show, favourable conditions for child-bearing are no guarantee for increasing birth-rates – only a complex set of emancipatory policies, including also soft factors, correlates with higher birth rates.

intentions which need to be achieved within and negotiated or fought for against existing structures,

- in sum, a perspective on agency as “constrained choice” (Folbre 1994) is never split off from inter-action; this perspective is enfolding in structure as a negotiated order (Strauss 1993), which is open for change.

With such a perspective, as is represented e.g. in approaches inspired by symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology, the dynamics of decision making strategies to become parents can be understood, respectively the related negotiation processes between the partners (see for Sweden Bergnéhr 2008, see for the PAIRFAM-project (Brüderl et al. 2007; Rupp 2007), as well as some non-intended effects as e.g. re-traditionalization of gender roles among partners when getting their first child (see for Germany Fthenakis et al. 2002).

These dynamics are always gender-dynamics, because they are situated in a gendered milieu, regarding the level of daily routines as well as the level of representation, in which it is very difficult to “undo gender”, i.e. to step out of the cycle of gendered ascriptions, expectations and their validation (for the concept of “doing gender” see West & Zimmerman, 1987; Ridgeway & Correl, 2004). Here, the framework concept of Emirbayer and Mische (1998), considering the temporality of action, reveals to be especially connective for gender theories. The framework idea of a (varying) interplay of (temporal) dimensions of agency described in their basic paper “What is agency?” elucidates gendering transitions into parenthood, be it within the decision-making-process of future young parents, be it within their transition to parenthood or within the management of their daily life after the transition has taken place. At all these stages of women’s and men’s transitions into parenthood, past, present and future intermingle and influence each other: iterative moments sticking to traditional models and normalities of parental roles and family traditions, but also to role models beyond “tradition” and to individual biographical experiences which have their influence on young women’s and men’s agency in present and future. The conditions for present coping and respective daily routines and experiences are colouring memories as well as future prospects. Self-concepts of young women and men, their ideas about intimate relationships, the way they sketch their lives and see themselves in the nearer or farer future, how they evaluate their near and far life perspectives, is depending on the conditions of today: how they deal with contingencies, how they manage their life, if and how they are falling back to (gendered) role conceptions in order to achieve some security or resisting such stereotypes.

Structural factors have their impact on the present, the past and the future dimension, and so does the (changing) imagery of fatherhood and motherhood, framing the context in which concrete actions take place.

Of course, this agency is deeply inter-active: at all levels, it is rooted in processes of social interaction which rework past, present and anticipated future, all of them transporting symbolic meaning. And it is linked to negotiation processes – among partners, among peers, but also among the generations. Regarding the question of (un-)doing gender, a lot seems to be depending on the conditions for and the competences of negotiating (e.g. negotiating familial tasks between the partners). Here, reference can be made to Habermas' communicative action (Habermas 1981), but also to structure as negotiated order, as has been outlined in the action theory of Anselm Strauss (1993).

Regarding the potential social change, concepts such as *creative action* (Joas 1996) have to be taken into account: in how far young adults do create new spaces for political influence, do create new concepts of fatherhood and motherhood, and establish new routes of transitions to work within a context they can hardly influence? And how (with Giddens 1984) do young women and men re-structure or change former patterns of transitions into parenthood and create new structures? This question has to be enlarged by a point Zygmunt Bauman (2001) made: where would enlargement of the public sphere be needed to negotiate life politics, acknowledging ways of doing parenthood/doing family/doing gender (differently)?

## **2. Reviewing research on transitions into parenthood under an agency perspective<sup>2</sup>**

For reviewing existing research on the topic, we have used two sensitizing concepts: culture and learning.

The *dimension of culture* is meant as a framework for individual or collective meaning-making, which itself is not fix but constantly shaped and re-worked by individual or collective practice. Such non-essentialist understanding of culture is highly important for European comparative research, in order to avoid the traps of constructing “difference” by reifying “differentiations”.

The *learning dimension* within transitions to parenthood makes visible the ever-new challenges of these transitions and the respective agentic processes, in which the learning of new practices is as important as the un-learning of others, above all under a gender perspective.

Using these keys in order to look for research findings and research gaps, we did not find so many studies appropriate for our interest in agency within the big amount of public data<sup>3</sup> and

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<sup>2</sup>See Du Bois-Reymond et al. 2008. See for the methodology including “transition regimes” as heuristic tool for transnational comparison the final report (Walther et al. 2009, forthcoming).

<sup>3</sup>On the EU- as well as the OECD-level a wealth of statistical material on the topic has been assembled (see Eurostat 2008; European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions 2007; OECD 2007; Vassilev & Wallace 2007; Gstrein 2007).

the huge body of research on family foundation (see du Bois-Reymond et al. 2008; Vassilev & Wallace 2007). Very briefly, some core findings are:

*First:* Riskful transitions – not only regarding the transition from education to the labour market – implicitly refer to agency: The reversibility of transitions (yoyoisation) is the underlying risk-structure also for transitions into parenthood – for both young women and men. Their agency could result in different strategies: they could handle the fact of riskful transitions into paid work either by consciously delaying parenthood longer than they would like to because they are not economically independent, or they become parents early in order to organize for themselves a kind of adult status (teenage parenthood).

*Second:* The discrepancy between the number of desired and realised child births, which can be found in all our countries, on all educational levels (see Jenson 2006), is an indicator of agency inbuilt in decision-making processes, in which young people do consider systemic constraints, labour market conditions, and the benefits of state support for young families. Here, the reviewed national studies show that in none of our countries parents feel sufficiently provided by support from the state and from the public at large. It is mainly in the field of quality and affordable childcare that they miss such support, not only the lack of facilities but just as painfully in the disharmony between working hours and crèche hours. Housing is also a big problem for many potential young families, which can be a contributory factor to delaying parenthood. All in all, what is painfully missing is an integrated transition policy for young people on their way to become and being parents (Crompton et al., 2007; Kröhnert & Klingholz 2008).

*Third:* In all countries, considerable changes have taken place in gender relationships: On the one hand, taking care for children is no longer regarded as the sole responsibility of women; men are much more involved in their role as young fathers than were earlier generations. 'New fatherhood' has become part of a gendered discourse although the symbolic representation of new fatherhood is pretending to be more a reality than can be found e.g. in statistics on parental leave. New gender imageries in this regard are the avant-garde of practices, but practices are much more advanced as policies – with different paces in our research countries. On the other hand, a new imagery of the omni-competent multitasking super women is putting young mothers under considerable pressure, because of the same lack of facilitating conditions. Agency in this regard can be located in successfully coping with this pressure.

*Fourth:* Intergenerational relationships, instead of getting looser, are getting closer again when young people are becoming parents. This is not always done voluntarily: particularly in countries with little state support, the parent generation has to and is willing to support their offspring by providing housing, caring for their grandchildren, and at times of stress help emotionally and financially. For most young people, the reconciliation of parenthood and

work would be plainly impossible without that intergenerational resource. This throws light on important omissions and failures in state family policies.

*Fifth:* learning has taken a prominent place in becoming and being a parent in late modernity and in the context of knowledge societies. The new cultural norm of Informed and agentic parents as best guarantee to educate “successful” children is one example for the structural need for agency. The European discourse on new connections between formal, non-formal and informal modes of learning has entered the discourses that surround young parenthood and young families. They imply very different levels of learning: from a quasi-professionalisation in matters such as the healthy upbringing of children, to a satisfying negotiation in gender relations, to successful fighting for one’s rights and interests as young parents on the work floor, to performing as active parents in educational institutions, to the creation of useful informal networks.

There is a lot of learning and informal policy involved in young parents’ agency, which is not always easily detected. That has to do with a split between so-called private and so-called public discourses. Although some “aspects concerning the private life are increasingly made objects of public debates, stage-managed media events, and political attempts at exerting control” (Jurczyk & Oechsle, 2006), the split between public and private still exists in solutions young parents find on an informal level.

So, agency evolves within (bad) conditions for the reconciliation of training, education, and gainful employment with young parenthood, together with the different drawbacks it implies for an equal work according to different frameworks of family and gender policies in Europe; it evolves within the shaping of intergenerational relationships while becoming and being parents, especially when going along with poverty, housing problems, and social exclusion in various European regions; it evolves in coping with the new normalities as “competent parents” within a new imagery on motherhood and fatherhood. Within these contexts, it also evolves in processes which slowly but surely rework gender relationships and the public-private divide.

This agency can only with caution (and only by considering negotiation processes) be regarded as traditional or as innovative; instead, there is a great variety of ways to perform the transition into parenthood (or to renounce to it), and as far as spurious studies show, they are full of ambivalences, in which tradition and modernity overlap.

3.

What should be considered by further gender-sensitive research?

If state of the art in youth research has been characterised as either being biased structurally or in terms of deliberated subjectivity, any appropriate gender-sensitive research should start

from agency as integrated concept. This means: to find research accesses which integrate both (inter-)subjective shaping of transitions into parenthood and the solutions young women and men find within hindering or facilitating structures, most often: structural dilemmata and constraints. On a theoretical level, this would mean to integrate acknowledgement and social justice (Fraser & Honneth 2003).

Such integrative perspective would mean to be open for the contradictory simultaneities in young people's transitions into parenthood – and ask: what is really going on there? The simultaneity of different transitions have to be studied in their interrelatedness as well as in comparative perspective; this includes qualitative approaches, possibly in a process-oriented, longitudinal perspective which allows for the reconstruction of inter-active decision-making processes of individuals and couples, situated within multifaceted contexts, their time management within life courses (Leccardi 2006), their coping with the paradox of planning. Taking into account the variety of motives and for transitions to parenthood (respectively for renouncing to it) and respective facilitating or hindering structures would fit into the program of a subject-related transition research (see Stauber et al. 2007)

As transitions into parenthood are a highly ideological topic, currently dominated by a strong demographic discourse, a promising research strategy in order to achieve new insights in young people's agency would be to formulate research questions *against* the mainstream discourses. Some options for such an agency-oriented shift in scientific attentiveness are:

- to look critically at phenomena of modernized ideologies of 'motherhood' or 'new fatherhood' and how they impact on the agency of young mothers and fathers,
- to focus on agency in transitions to parenthood within different social contexts rather than adopting one-dimensional distinctions between 'modernity' and 'tradition'; this includes especially transitions into parenthood under the conditions of migration and transculturality,<sup>4</sup>
- to explore (de-)gendering strategies of first parents, who struggle with or adapt to the latent re-traditionalization of gender roles after the birth of their first child through a lack of opportunities and public acknowledgement in the realisation of gender equality in all

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<sup>4</sup> A large research gap in all our countries is the lack of attention paid to young people from ethnic minorities or with a migrant background in their transitions to parenthood – although it seems to come attention to this subject, as with the EU-projects INTERFACE and AWARE (At Work Against Racial Exclusion). Important topics are also agency under the conditions of ethnisation processes, which can be observed in the Baltic States, as well as in the countries of former Yugoslavia, or issues such as arranged marriages.

areas of work – including family work<sup>5</sup> - e.g. by in-depth analysis in young women and men who explicitly reject ascribed roles, in young women and men longing for a youth life combined with new features of motherhood and fatherhood; in dual-career and highly mobile couples<sup>6</sup>, as well as in young couples coping with poverty or severe housing problems;

- to develop research strategies which question the public-private-divide, e.g. by in-depth research in young parents who, despite disadvantageous conditions and limiting structures, organize networks and find new, not (yet) officially acknowledged solutions, among them: the inclusion of fathers in family work (Hobson 2007);
- to develop research strategies which are appropriate to identify the educational needs of young women and men in their transitions to parenthood, and the format e. g. family education or parental education should have in order to fit the needs of different groups of young mothers and fathers (see Mühling & Smolka 2007).

These research strategies would be appropriate to get insight in the agency of young people in terms of engendering and degendering processes within their transitions into parenthood.

## Conclusion

One core result of the UP2YOUTH research process is to develop agency as an integrative concept, which gives access to new research strategies. As has been outlined, the benefit of this concept for youth research is to be seen in its quality to integrate formerly antagonistic approaches. The topic of transitions into parenthood could show in an exemplary way, how important this integration is – above all when considering a gender perspective: questions of acknowledgment of individual styles of doing motherhood, doing fatherhood, doing family are to be considered as much as questions of social inequality. Young people are at the same time actors of social change as they are struggling against social exclusion.

At the same time, this new perspective could inspire policies for young people in a different way: If in former publications we have plead for Integrative Transition policies, which are considering the various transitions in young people's life, providing them not only with a level of basic social security, but also with education policies, giving broad access to what knowledge societies demand, with labour market policies, opening access for professional prospects, with sufficient social infrastructure, fostering the reconciliation of family and work (see Walther et al. 2006), we now would stress even more the level of acknowledgment of

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<sup>5</sup> See Fthenakis et al. 2002, as well as the PAIRFAM (Panel Analysis of intimate Relationships and Family Dynamics) (Brüderl et al. 2007), being designed as longitudinal project in order to make clear that 'young parenthood' should be studied as an ongoing process and not simply as a status. It will be enlarged towards comparative research.

<sup>6</sup> See Behnke & Meuser (2005), and the special Issue *Zeitschrift für Familienforschung/Journal of Family Research* 2007/3.

young people's agency: This again is rooted in the analysis of de-standardized transitions. *The main aspect of these changes is that subjectivity has gained so much importance for social integration in these yoyoized, increasingly individualised and riskful transitions that it cannot be separated from the more structure and integration related strands of youth policy.*

By considering young people as actors of social change, an important qualitative turning point in terms of the political proliferation of better opportunities to unfold such agency seems to be achieved. In the same direction points Amartya Sen's capabilities approach, which has shifted attention from inequalities in resources, outcomes and preferences to inequalities in capabilities, in other words his or her freedom to be or to do what s/he has reason to value. Not surprisingly researchers working on transitions into parenthood (see Crompton et al. 2007: 235, Vassilev & Wallace 2007) in the meantime end up in this more option-related concept, which has to be further explored for transition policies in general.

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