

The Role of Fathers: How Implicit and Explicit Messages about Parenting in Slovak Media and Legislation Relate to Lay Attitudes and Argumentation

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to outline how focus group participants' accounts about reproduction and parenting interact with media and legislation texts around these topics through the discourses they draw from. We collected 1) all relevant articles in the last 10 years (2002-2011) in the most important Slovak mainstream broadsheet daily SME (N=1500), 2) all relevant articles in the most important Catholic broadsheet (N=132) for the last year (10/2010-9/2011), as well as 3) all relevant laws currently in force and looked for the main messages about parenting. To explore attitudes and argumentations of lay people (parents, future parents, as well as child-free persons) about reproduction and parenting we organized 15 semi-structured focus group (FG) discussions with young men (N=48) and women (N=39), aged 20-34. Seven groups were all male, four all female and four were mixed, with participants from various socio-economic backgrounds and varying levels of education. The discussions were analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis and basic critical discursive analysis. Findings from media and legislation text analysis correspond with the FG participants' accounts especially concerning the limited role of fathers and negative stereotypes about fatherhood.

Keywords: parenting, fatherhood, stereotypes, reproduction, media analysis, focus groups

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1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to outline how focus group participants' accounts about reproduction and parenting interact with media and legislation texts around these topics through the discourses they draw from.

In the framework of the research project *Sustainable reproduction in Slovakia: a psycho-social inquiry* we stress the social psychological perspective in the exploration of reproduction and parenting discourses. Thus we are mainly interested in perspectives, attitudes and argumentations of lay people – parents, parents-to-be as well as child-free persons – about reproduction and parenting. We explore these using a combination of focus group discussions and a representative quantitative survey data, but we acknowledge and explore also the broad social context of real life possibilities in Slovakia. The cultural and normative framework in which people in Slovakia make their decisions today is strongly marked by post-socialism, capitalism as well as Catholicism (ca. 70% declared affiliation to the Catholic faith in the last census). We look also into structural and legislative framework – the laws, regulations, real life practices and state benefits concerning nurseries, kindergarten and schools, but also laws and costs regulating abortions, IVF, adoptions, etc. – as well as into the media discourses as developed by the mainstream and Catholic print media.

In Slovakia, “sustainable reproduction” is an important topic in a totally different way than in e.g. China - the reproduction rate in our country is very low (total fertility < 1.3) and young people tend to postpone childbearing (most women are 25-29 years old when having the first child). This situation is part of a more complex shift, known throughout the western countries as the Second Demographic Transition (SDT; Lestaege, van de Kaa, 1986). Widely spread are panic discourses about ageing of the population, mainly in the context of the old-age pension system not functioning in the near future and not so much in the context of immigrants overtaking Slovakia as it can be sometimes found in western Europe. On the other hand, partly there is also the discourse about the Roma minority (currently ca. 10% of the Slovak citizens) becoming the majority in the future. In the specific situation in Slovakia, this shift is combined with a strong tradition of women working (since socialism), but also of them caring for small children at home until they are 3 years old (see also Potancoková, 2009).

In this broader context, elsewhere we concentrated on the particular subjects e.g. of family planning stereotypes (Bianchi, Popper, Luksik, Petrjanosova, 2012), sexual lifestyles (Luksik,

Markova, 2012) or decision making processes in parenthood questions (Popper, 2012), etc. In this data driven paper from the early stages of analysis we want to focus only on parenthood discourses and especially on discourses around fatherhood, as used in the accounts of the focus group participants as well as in the media.

2. Methodology: Data and methods of analysis

We argue that because of their power to form the public discourse, the media can influence how people “see” the world, what issues they think about, what is controversial for them and what is rather normal or even incontestable (Richardson, 2007). Of course, the media discourse does not represent the public opinion; it is rather a discursive arena where the public debate is developed and personal opinions and attitudes are formed (Triandafyllidou, 2002).

To understand what frameworks this discursive arena in Slovakia offers for lay people’s thinking about reproduction and parenting, as the first step we conducted a press analysis. We concentrated on print media and in order to investigate possible long-term changes of the media messages about reproduction and parenting we collected 1) all relevant articles in the last 10 years (2002-2011) in the most important Slovak mainstream broadsheet daily SME (N=1500) and analyzed them according to main themes and discourses they draw from. Then, to facilitate the inclusion of minority discourses, we collected also 2) all relevant articles in the most important Catholic broadsheet (N=132) for the last year (10/2010-9/2011). All the articles from the last year from both newspapers (N=305) were analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis and basic critical discursive analysis. We were interested in the following questions: How are reproduction and parenting thematized in Slovak print media, what are the main messages? What is described as normal? Are there contradictions? What actors are present? What are their roles? What is omitted/ not thematized at all?

To understand the legislative framework we analyzed 3) all relevant laws currently in force, selected laws also from the viewpoint of changes over time using critical discursive analysis.

To explore perspectives, attitudes and argumentations of lay people (parents, future parents, as well as child-free persons) about reproduction and parenting we organized 15 semi-structured focus group discussions with young men (N=48) and women (N=39), aged 20-34. Seven groups were all male, four all female and four were mixed, with participants from various socio-economic backgrounds and varying levels of education. Always two

moderators focused on the participants' lifestyles, partner-and-parental-role constructions, work-and-family/parenting relations and normative opinions on parenthood. The discussions were analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis and basic critical discursive analysis with the support of the Atlas.ti software.

Based on preliminary results of this qualitative exploration, in 2012 we conducted a quantitative representative national survey (N=1400; respondents aged 18 to 45) around the same themes, but to focus this paper more tightly we shall not go into further details concerning the legislation analysis neither the quantitative data and shall concentrate only on the media and focus group material.

3. Results

3.1 Press analysis – the almost inexistent role of fathers

Using a critical-discursive approach (see e.g. Wodak, Meyer, 2009) to the press analysis of all reproduction and parenting related articles we have found several important clusters of themes related either to the micro level – individual actors or to the macro level – the Slovaks as a national group. The main micro level clusters were around the themes of 1) *children*, 2) *pregnancy*, 3) *motherhood* and 4) *assisted reproduction*. On the macro level, the most important themes were the 1) “*we are dying out*” argument and the thematization of 2) *the Roma minority* (ca 10% of Slovak population) because of their specifics: in general Roma parents tend to have much more children (5-10 children in a family are not an exemption) and according to the generally shared stereotype by the non-Roma they cannot care for them properly.

For example, looking more closely at the first thematic cluster “*children*” and at its most important messages as well as omissions, we could find the following: 1) “*the most important thing in life is to have a child/ children*”, 2) “*there are a lot of single mothers*”, 3) “*children need fathers, too*” and 4) “*children should be born into a marriage*”. We would like to emphasize that almost always when the articles were speaking about “*children*”, the number was not specified, but implicitly two children were meant, as the stereotype of a happy family goes in so many commercials.

Some of the main messages were openly contradictory – e.g. the high numbers of single mothers and the norm to bear children into a marriage were often used shortly after each other without discussing their conflicting potential. Another strong theme were adoptions, but

there was no one clear message about them. Contrastingly, child-free persons were not thematized at all and teenage pregnancies only barely.

What is omitted but could have been discussed can be best observed when comparing a theme in the media for example in two different states, or sometimes even in two different newspapers in the same state. Then differences can be clearly seen that are otherwise at least partly hidden, because the researchers are also part of the same social world and even if they are able to look at the available discourses critically, it is almost impossible to “break free” and disengage from their influence completely.

Another cluster where men–fathers were mentioned, was the one concerning assisted reproduction. It contained messages like: 1) *“it is not easy to get pregnant”*, 2) *“women postpone motherhood and that is dangerous”*, 3) *“because of medical help, it is not a problem to get pregnant and bear a child after 35 years of age”*, 4) *“infertility of men is very common now”*, 5) *“assisted reproduction can help”*, 6) *“health insurance companies do not want to cover assisted reproduction”* and 7) *“assisted reproduction is not allowed by the Catholic neither by the Orthodox church”*. Again, the contradictions were often ignored even in the same article (for more details see Petrjanosova, 2012).

To sum up, fatherhood was nowhere to be seen among the main themes. Men/ fathers in the press were thematized only rarely, somehow “by the way” and only in a few specific contexts. First, relating to the problem of male infertility, which was portrayed as becoming more and more important. Second, in the claim that children have a right to have a mother as well as a father, but only when the authors used it as an argument against a law allowing same-sex couples to adopt (which was discussed two years ago in Slovakia, but was never really proposed) or an argument against single mothers. Otherwise the important actors mentioned concerning reproduction and parenting were always women. Thus messages about fatherhood were quite often rather implied and to be read between the lines than spoken out.

3.2 Fatherhood models in the focus group discussions

When looking only into the experiences of and possibilities for fatherhood elaborated in the focus group discussions, with a little simplification we can claim to have found three distinctive models of fatherhood: the stereotypical, the modern and the radically new (see more details in Bianchi, Popper, Luksik, Petrjanosova, 2012).

In the first model, the “stereotypical” one, men should be breadwinners and women should be caring for children (and more or less also for the household) and should be staying at home with the children when they are small, ca. the first three years. An example of this fatherhood model was used by the male participant in the following extract, when he explained at what time he wants to have a family:

Extract No. 1: When I can provide financial security

M: Thus you plan to have the family and the children only sometime after thirty years of age, right?

A: Well when I actually get... When I've finished studying and I've got a job and can provide financial security for us, then for the children (Nitra 2, male group; M is the moderator, A a participant).

The second fatherhood model, the one we called „modern“, was prevailing. The participants explained how today men participate a lot in the childcare as well as in the household chores, how it is different from the past, from the generation of their parent, how the norms are changing, etc. However, almost always they described the role of the father just as a role of a “helper” in contrast to the role of the woman, who seemed to be the main carer for the child as well as the manager of the whole household. An example is given in the following extract where the male participant explains explicitly the role of the father as an important one, but at the same time goes on to position him only in the helper role:

Extract No. 2: It is important to help her

(...) well, because the woman cannot bring up the child on her own, it is important to help her, she cannot be alone with the child during the whole 24 hours, during the whole week. Thus it is important to help her as well as to help the small one. Thus the role of the father is quite important in my opinion, especially in the beginning (Trnava 1, male group).

In this context it looked like the men are able to and should participate a lot in childcare, but only in the framework of simpler or assigned tasks and should a complicated situation or a crisis come, the main carer who can manage all situations – the woman – will solve it.

The third model referred to in the discussions was the most interesting one for us and we called it the “radical” model (of course, it is radical only in the context of the Slovak society). In the framework of this model the female as well as male participants expressed quite liberal views concerning the roles of men and women in the couple, in the household and in parenting, for example for Slovakia the very unusual idea that men can take the so called

paternal leave and stay at home with and care also for very small children. The next two extracts are examples of such an argumentation:

Extract No. 3: Some fathers go on maternity leave

(...) now it's no problem for fathers to bring up their little kids, they can give them a bath by themselves, change their nappies and take them for walks and have fun with them, basically these days some fathers go on maternity leave instead of the mothers, which was definitely not so obvious before. (Trnava, mixed group, male participant)

Extract No. 4: The man sometimes becomes the mother

M: Is this the only model possible?

*B: Sometimes it is the other way round. **The man sometimes becomes the mother, the roles are switched.*** (Nitra, mixed group; M is the moderator, B a male participant)

From the viewpoint of discursive analysis it is very interesting to look at how exactly the participants expressed these views and described these models of parenting so unusual for Slovakia - what terms and concepts did they use? For example, in the extract 3 the participant used the term “*maternity leave*”. We could argue that the cited participant did not want to express his views that childcare is a woman’s task, but only used the older term instead of the newer one. In the Slovak legislation currently the gender neutral term “*parental leave*” is used, but lay people almost always use the old term and speak about the “*maternity leave*”. From the critical discursive position we can ask a provocative question – what if it is not a coincidence that the new term has such difficulties to spread in Slovakia? What if the use of this term is just a small example showing which parenting discourses prevail in this country and how strongly?

This influence is even clearer in the extract no. 4, when the male participant explains the situation when the man stays at home with small children and chooses the formulation (or cannot find any other than) „*the man becomes the mother*“. As if it was very difficult to describe this new model in any other way than to refer to the commonly used „*roles*“ – one person cares for the children more and that is the mother, another cares less and that is the father and these roles are given but they can „*switch*“. As if other discourses were nonexistent or at least not commonly available - discourses offering concepts and a vocabulary for describing caring fathers, full-time fathers, fathers who care for their children at least to the same extend as their mothers, or fathers who define through fatherhood their personal identity.

4. Discussion and tentative conclusions

To sum up the ways in which the media texts on reproduction and parenting interact with the focus participants' accounts, we conclude that:

1) Slovak media texts simply focus on women and men are almost invisible there, the only exemptions being the theme of male infertility and the general prescriptive norm that children should be born into and live in complete families. Otherwise men are almost not mentioned at all. Even in the cited statistics about the age of having the first child there is no information on men nor in the widely spread "*we are dying out*" scenarios there is information on numbers of childless men (see also Haskova, Zamykalova, 2006, who describe the same omissions in the Czech media).

2) In the focus groups it was relatively easy to express any stereotypical views, firstly probably because in Slovakia they are not seen as "bad" stereotypes that should be abandoned and secondly because the discursive means to describe them were easily accessible and understandable to all. To the contrary, men and women expressing their views in the terms of radically liberal perspectives had mostly problems to describe their opinions and were short of words and concepts, the models being so new and the prevailing discourses being so different

Thus the findings from media text analysis correspond with the focus groups participants' accounts especially concerning the limited role of fathers and negative stereotypes about fatherhood, mainly concerning fathers as non full-fledged parents.

In general, the fatherhood models exist in a broader normative context where the media are just one part of, but we assume that their role is an important one. In Slovakia one of the main norms of "good" parenthood is to plan the number of children as well as the time when to have them, together with the prescription to wait until there is a place to live and some means to live from. Thus the men who see their role as breadwinners simply have to postpone fatherhood to later in life when they are already able to fulfil these requirements. If men see their role in accordance with the "modern" model – i.e. that they should "help" the woman who is the main actor in the parenthood arena, the individual couples negotiate how exactly this help should look like and work. This happens without any doubt at least to some extent inspired by the examples accessible in the public discourses on parenthood. If men see their role in an egalitarian way, as we could see, sometimes they were short of terms and concepts

to describe these fatherhood models, even if there are already in Slovakia real life examples of men on parental leave, etc.

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