

Diverging views?

How personal attitudes and perceived norms about formal childcare change during the family formation phase

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Introduction

The birth of the first child can be seen as a live changing event. Many researches show how previously childless persons and couples change their everyday actions when they become parents, for example in the division of domestic work, the length of parental leave, the maternal anticipation in domestic work or regarding the question how and by whom the child is cared for (Pollmann-Schult 2016; Kreyenfeld 2015; Schober 2013; Pfau-Effinger 2012). By becoming a parent individuals assume a new role (Dahrendorf 1965) which can affect their identity (Deutsch et al. 1988) and thus may also change their attitudes and beliefs (Mayer 2009; Elder 1995) like gender norms (Buchler et al. 2017; Baxter et al. 2015; Schober/Scott 2012; Katz-Wise et al. 2010; Moors 2003). One explanation for a shift of gender norms towards a more traditional attitude may also be an adaption of their action: After family formation the mother is often the primary caregiver of the new born and the couple find themselves in a “traditionalizing trap” (Rüling 2007). Former egalitarian attitudes don not match with the actual gender division of labour. So there is a cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957) and many parents try to mitigate this by unconsciously adapting their attitude to their action. According to “identity salience theory” (Stryke/Burke 2000), individuals attribute different priorities to these internalized roles which may result to a change of attitudes.

It is less known how attitudes about formal childcare change when individuals become parents. This is an important field of research, thus existing childcare plans may change and the assessments of the childcare institution may influence the decision as to how one's own child will and should be cared for. The evaluation of external childcare institutions is relevant as they are mostly the alternatives to the mother as caretaker and make maternal labor participation possible. Germany is an interesting case as it is a conservative welfare state in which a paradigm change in family politics occurred and which has, in addition, the historical fact of the division with different family policies.

In addition to the personal attitude, the perceived image in society is also important for a sociological view as it can be seen as an abstraction of the “generalized others” (Mead 1967/1934). Those two perspectives may have discrepancies as the personal opinion may differ from the perception of the prevailing opinion in society (Lück/Ruckdeschel 2018; Diabaté/Lück 2014). Our research takes up the conception of “life scripts” (Janssen/Rubin 2011; Berntsen/Rubin 2002) and “life course” (Mayer 2009; Settersten 2003; Elder 1995). Our research interest is to investigate whether the event of the first child's birth changes the personal attitude or perceived norm about formal childcare for under-threes. So our research questions are:

- Does the transition to parenthood influence the personal attitude to formal childcare for under-threes?
- Does the transition to parenthood have an impact on the perceived norms to childcare for under-threes?

Data and Methods

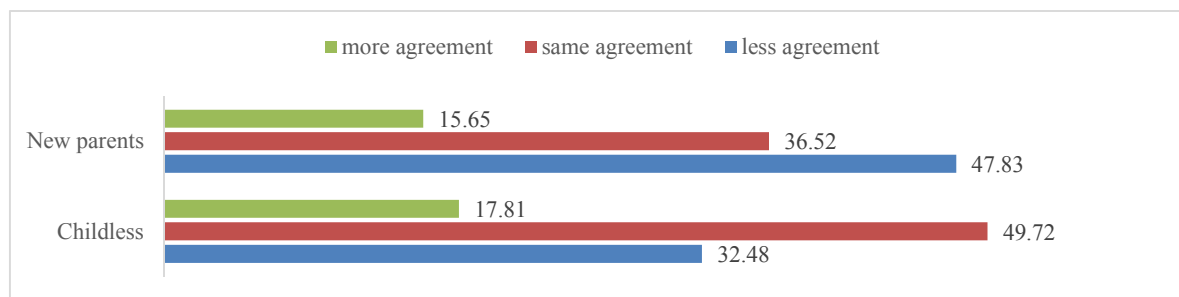
To test our assumptions, we have carried out a survey on personal attitudes and perceived norms (“Leitbilder”) in Germany (Family Leitbild Survey) (Wolfert et al. 2017; Schneider et al. 2016). In two waves (2012 and 2016) German residents born between 1973 and 1992 were interviewed, based on a standardised questionnaire, using CATI technique, about issues like partnership, family and also childcare. A special feature about this study is that the respondents should tell their personal opinion about the issues as well as they should assume the attitudes of society. Our analytical sample includes all respondents who participated in both survey waves, were childless in the first wave and do not have any missing values in the variables which are in the models: so there are 702 persons, who were childless in both waves and 115 persons, who were childless in the first wave and became parents since then.

Those data are analysed with hybrid panel regression models. A big advantage of this method is the combination of comparing those two groups in an interpersonal between component as well as the within component shows whether there is an intrapersonal change because of the event of becoming a parent (Allison 2009). Another benefit is that the integration of time constant control variables in a panel analytical model is possible.

Findings

Figure 1 shows the changing agreement to the statement “children between 1 and 3 years suffer if they are mainly looked after in a day care center or crèche” between the two waves comparing childless persons and person which where childless in the first wave and became parent since then. As we can see there are significant differences in the drift of the answers: Almost half of the family founders (47.84%) changed their answers to less agreement after they became parents. In contrast one third of the childless reduced their reservation against external childcare in the second wave. Those descriptive results suggest that founding a family may influence the personal evaluation of external childcare institutions.

Figure 1: Differences in the personal scale of consent to the statement “Children between 1 and 3 years suffer if they are mainly looked after in a day care center or crèche” in wave comparison



Note: Childless persons N=702; Family founders N=115; $\chi^2=10,575$ $p<0.01$
Source: Family Leitbild Survey (FLB 2012 and 2016), own calculations

For deeper analyses hybrid models have been calculated in table 1, which combined interpersonal (between) and intrapersonal (within) components. As model 1 shows the transition to parenthood has an interpersonal difference as well as an intrapersonal difference. The between component shows that new parents agreed less than childless persons to the statement: “toddlers suffer in external childcare institutions”. An intrapersonal effect is shown in the within component: former childless persons change their personal attitudes about formal childcare to a less critical opinion if they become parents. In model 2

the control variables education, religiosity, gender and “living in East- or West-Germany” were included. With this addition the effect of the transition to parenthood reduced its power and level of significance in the between component; while all of the control variables have high significant results. Persons with high education, from East-Germany and who are female have less reservation against external childcare institutions, but with rising religiosity also the agreement increases that a toddler would suffer in those institutions. The within component shows that, even with the addition of the control variables, the intrapersonal change because of the transition to parenthood does not lose power or level of significance. Controlling by the survey year shows that there is a general change to less reservation against external childcare institutions.

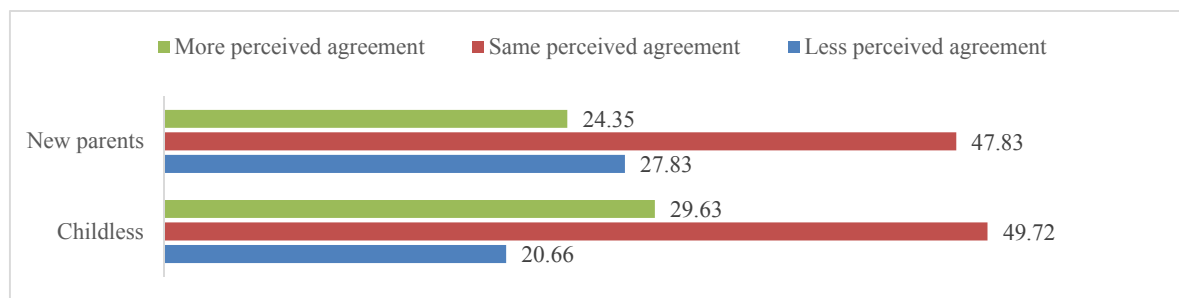
Table 1: Hybrid panel regression models to the personal agreement for the statement “Children between 1 and 3 years suffer if they are mainly looked after in a day care center or crèche”

	Model 1				Model 2			
	Between		Within		Between		Within	
Family formation	-0.463**	(0.15)	-0.175*	(0.09)	-0.248 ⁺	(0.15)	-0.179*	(0.09)
High education	—		—		-0.271***	(0.06)	-0.040	(0.07)
Religiosity	—		—		0.135***	(0.02)	0.028	(0.04)
Woman	—		—		-0.191***	(0.05)	—	
East Germany	—		—		-0.448***	(0.06)	—	
Survey year 2016	—		-0.164***	(0.03)	—		-0.156***	(0.03)
Constant	1.326***		(0.03)		1.575***		(0.05)	
N (Persons years)	1634				1634			
R ² (overall)	0.0211				0.1264			
R ² (within)	0.0542				0.0551			
R ² (between)	0.0110				0.1483			

Note: level of significance: ⁺ p ≤ 0.1; * p ≤ 0.05; ** p ≤ 0.01; *** p ≤ 0.001
Source: Family Leitbild Survey (FLB 2012 and 2016), own calculations

A look at figure 2 shows, that the perceived agreements do not differ that much between the waves and comparing family founders with the childless. Almost half of both groups did not change their perceived attitudes. Family founders perceived a bit more change to assent than to reservation, but with 3.5 percent points the difference is marginal.

Figure 2: Differences in the perceived scale of consent to the statement “Children between 1 and 3 years suffer if they are mainly looked after in a day care center or crèche” in wave comparison



Note: Childless persons N=702; Family founders N=115; $\chi^2=3.371$ p≥0.1
Source: Family Leitbild Survey (FLB 2012 and 2016), own calculations

As already the descriptive analysis suggested the hybrid models (table 2) shows that transition to parenthood does not have any significant results in the within components. Thus there are differences between the questionnaires: Persons who become parents feel in average less reservation against the external childcare than persons who stayed childless. With addition of the control variables the transition to parenthood does not lose its power or level of significance. Individuals who are more religious do also recognize less reservation to those institutions. This stands in contrast to the results of the personal attitudes which rise with higher religiosity. An explanation might be that religious people perceived the society's attitudes more egalitarian in comparison to their own more traditional opinion. Respondents from East-Germany also perceived less agreement that toddlers would suffer if they are mainly looked after in a day care center.

Table 2: Hybrid panel regression models to the perceived agreement for the statement “Children between 1 and 3 years suffer if they are mainly looked after in a day care center or crèche“

	Model 1				Model 2			
	Between		Within		Between		Within	
Family formation	-0.255*	(0.11)	-0.097	(0.08)	-0.275*	(0.11)	-0.104	(0.08)
High education	—		—		0.033	(0.04)	0.101	(0.08)
Religiosity	—		—		-0.067***	(0.02)	0.072 ⁺	(0.04)
Woman	—		—		0.146	(0.04)	—	
East Germany	—		—		-0.101*	(0.05)	—	
Survey year 2016	—		0.097**	(0.03)	—		0.081*	(0.04)
Constant		1.540***		(0.03)		1.575***		(0.04)
N (Persons years)	1634				1634			
R ² (overall)	0.0079				0.0302			
R ² (within)	0.0108				0.0165			
R ² (between)	0.0062				0.0382			

Note: level of significance: ⁺ p ≤ 0.1; * p ≤ 0.05; ** p ≤ 0.01; *** p ≤ 0.001
Source: Family Leitbild Survey (FLB 2012 and 2016), own calculations

Conclusion

The results of the hybrid models show, that there are significant differences between childless persons and new parents. Individuals who became parents have on average less reservation about formal childcare than persons who remained childless. With the addition of the socioeconomic control variables the between component reduced its influence. However, all the control variables have highly significant effects. The event of becoming a parent also has an impact on changing an individual's personal attitude. This can be explained by the use of these institutions and the changing networks that have become more and more child-centered. For the perceived opinion in society the analyses show an effect between the two groups. On average family founders don not feel the concerns about external childcare as childless persons. But the new parents do not change their minds after their child is born, so there is no intrapersonal effect after the life changing event of becoming parents. Both results show an increasing cultural gap between young parents and other parts of society regarding child care acceptance. Additionally we still observe divergent views on parental culture between East and West-Germany.

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