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The Birth as a Rite of Passage from Man to Father

ABSTRACT. The article shows that the birth of a child is not just a physical, but also a social and cultural event. It might be considered as a rite of passage that turns women into mothers and men into fathers, and both into parents. For men, the birth of a child is a significant change in life that is commonly taken for granted. As a result, life for most men changes fundamentally with the birth of a child. In addition, many fathers see the pregnancy, birth and the months thereafter as an extremely important time in their lives, during which they turn from a man into a father. Simultaneously, many of them embrace the fact of what an enrichment the children are for their own personal development. In these months the fathers are undergoing consequent transformation processes which demand certain efforts and are sometimes painful. In the process, they train new practices of fatherhood in the familiar living together.

KEYWORDS: rite of passage, fatherhood, birth of a child

*For my father Johannes Wulf
and my son Alexander Johannes Wulf*

For men the birth of a child represents a significant change in life that is commonly taken for granted. Owing to this important change in life, a man turns into a father (Wulf, 2008; Wulf et al., 2008). As a result, life for most men changes fundamentally with the birth of a child. Irrespective of how good or bad the relationship develops between the father and child throughout the course of life, it influences the quality of life for all participants in a long-lasting manner (Fthenakis, 1985; Gloger-Tippelt, 1988; Zaouche-Gaudron, 2001; Drinck, 2005).

The birth of a child is not just a physical, but also a social and cultural event. It might be considered a rite of passage that turns women into mothers and men into fathers, and both into parents. During pregnancy a change is happening from their previous individual and social situation to their role as future parents. Along with the birth itself, this transition is being processed (cf. Wulf, 2005; Wulf et al., 2001, 2004, 2007, 2010).

For a long time in the research on family and gender the father was "a forgotten part of parenthood" (Aigner 2001). Since the 1960s his absence has been claimed over and over again. The developmental deficits of children brought up by single mothers and the negative economic and social consequences of this situation have been discussed (Mitscherlich, 1963). Since the 1970s the father has been seen as an important interaction partner who, together with the mother, has had to provide the necessary care and nursing. In the 1980s and 1990s the non-reducible significance of the father for the cognitive, psychological and social development of children was emphasized. Today, the significance of the father is also seen in its gender-specific way of handling the children. From a psychoanalytic point of view, it is being highlighted how important it is for the child to build up a triadic relationship (see: Allert 1998; Metzger 2008). The historical and cultural character of fatherhood is being emphasized in the first place. Fatherhood is primarily being understood as an outcome of a social and individual construction process (Lupton/Barclay, 1997).

The contemporary image of the man and father, largely related to the child and family, has been built against a long history of the father, mother and family, whose traces can still be found in the collective and individual imaginary sense, the mentality of men and the practices of everyday life (Knibiehler, 1996; Lenzen, 1991; Bozet/Hanson, 1991). The new image of the father within family talks and arrangement must continuously be reinvented and secured in the everyday practices (Fthenakis, 1985, 1999; Erhard & Janig, 2003). The work on this father image begins during pregnancy and is continued after the birth of a child in the practice of care, nursing, upbringing and counselling (Berman, 1987; Marsiglio, 1995; LaRossa, 1997). This father image with regard to child, partner and family is not a sharp continuous leading picture. It therefore must be developed together by fathers, mothers and children through conversations and practices of everyday life.

This process is affected by historical father images of past generations, some traces of which can be evaluated positively and some negatively. The contemporary child and family-related father images emerge not without reference to the equivalent mother, children and family images (Lenzen 1991; Ecarius 2007; Fuhs 2007; Frieberthäuser/Matzner/Rothmüller 2007). The process in which every family creates its obligatory family practices enfolds itself in the dynamic interactions in which not just one, but several normative orientations claim their

validity. Which of them is to be valid has to be developed by every participant in the creative shaping of the family imaginary world and the everyday family practices. This process of negotiation is strengthened during pregnancy; is consolidated in connection with the experience of birth and develops its full effectiveness under the family living conditions after the birth. This process is affected by the socio-economical conditions, cultural influences that are milieu-specific and the dynamics of the desire towards other members of the family. Hence this is a complex process, which is full of conflict; it often fails and leads, despite the mutual wishes and desires of all participants, to the destruction of many families and family-like living communities.¹

Which images of the father, fatherly care and nursing practices emerge within the future families and *how* the representations of birth occurring during pregnancy, the radical experience of birth and new practices of fatherhood contribute to the constitution of family communities is to be examined. Secondly, it is important to show how the images of the conditions and obstacles of family life after the birth affect the emerging of the father image and contribute to the occurring of practices of fatherly care and nursing. The aim is to *examine the transformation process during which men become fathers*.²

Pregnancy

While the slow transition of a woman into a mother during pregnancy is clearly visible, the transition of men into fathers is much less noticeable. The meaningful changes take place in the imaginary world of the future father and in the numerous practices of living together. From the mental anticipation of the new situation as a father emerges a number of mental images, narratives, emotions and demands which were to a large extent alien to men before the pregnancy.

¹ According to data provided by the Federal Bureau of Statistics (2004, p. 57) out of 6.9 million married couples with children under 18 in 2002 in Germany, 102,000 had a divorce which left 157,000 juvenile children, 86% of which lived with their mothers.

² Many of the following executions are based on the vast empirical material that had been raised in the framework of a project financed by the German Research Society. The interested reader is preordained on the executions that are the basis of the evaluation of the material (Wulf, Hänsch & Brumlik, 2008).

In many cases the news of a pregnancy releases ambiguous feelings, in which joy, fear, uncertainty and anxiety of taking over new responsibilities mix in an individual manner. If a man or a woman is surprised by the pregnancy they play it out with the help of their imagination whether they could and want to see themselves (again) as a mother or father. Often they discover that the timing of the pregnancy is not convenient, depending if one of them wanted to conclude his or hers studies, or if the couple already has a child or children and would prefer to wait before the arrival of a third child. Mothers and fathers constantly report that a surprise pregnancy interrupts their previous plans in life and forces them to redesign their visions of the future. Owing to the fact that with these changes comes a partial loss of control over their own life, fears and anxieties emerge which are emphasized by the fact that the future life is anticipated as unknown, unsafe and full of surprises. Many couples experience immense difficulty recognising *the uncertainty and the not knowing* as conditions of pregnancy and the birth and react towards it with fear and worry.

Many future parents worry about the health of the baby and the dangers that might occur during the birth. This is the reason why for many fathers and mothers the interaction with the midwifery and obstetrics units is very important. Often the representatives of the professional midwifery and obstetrics units point out the possible risks that might occur during pregnancy and the birth, and they also offer to help the future parents in order to protect them from possible dangers. Throughout the process an argumentation framework is created which has a great influence on the medical system during pregnancy and the birth.

The announcement of a pregnancy stirs up ambiguous feelings among many men. These feelings emerge from the anticipation of the birth and their imminent fatherhood. Along with the moderate joy there are articulated fears and worries in relation to the health of the unborn and the uncertainties connected with the birth. Many men see pregnancy and birth as a mutual task of the couple, whose consequences are anticipated for their own and their partner's life. There are apparently no significant differences within the father images between men and their spouses. The representations and images of fatherhood accepted during living together have to be developed by every couple in dealing with the family traditions, desired images and social realities. The future father is worried especially about the anticipated responsibility for the financial

situation of the family following the birth of the child. Some fear they could not live up to this challenge and this is why as a man and father they might fail at a central task.

During the pregnancy many future fathers are becoming familiar with the unborn in processes in which they mimetically relate to their expected child, they become “similar to each other” and confront them in an emotional and mental manner (Wulf, 2001, 2005, 2009). This happens with the help of *mental images* which the future father creates in relation to the expected child and the living conditions after its birth. In this process of confrontation with the unborn, past experiences with children, memories of one’s own childhood, stories told by friends and relatives, television movies and photographs of the unborn start to form and mix with the imaginary representations and new representations related to their own life situation. With these mental images of the future life, interruptions to the contemporary life are being implemented. Not only fathers, but also mothers, sisters and brothers, grandparents, uncles and aunts and also friends, participate in this process. A collective imaginary space of representations emerges (Hüpplauf & Wulf, 2006), in which the child is born and a social place is assigned to it (Groppe, 2007).

In this process of becoming familiar with the future child and the creation of the imaginary family world, the ultrasound images play an important role for many future fathers who do not feel the unborn in their own body but see it and touch it from the outside. The ultrasound images visualise the unborn child hidden in the womb of the mother. Thanks to these ultrasound images, mothers, fathers and their siblings gain access to the life unfolding in their mother’s body. Most fathers view this “access” to the mother’s body as necessary for the protection of the new life. They see these video images as a fascinating possibility to gain access to information on their future child and a chance to make contact with it and develop a relationship which prepares them for their role as a father. Also the future siblings, grandparents and friends see the ultrasound images as recognition of the unborn and a chance for slow realisation. These pictures support the incorporation of the future child into the family and the socialization of the new life before it comes into the world.

In particular, the specialist diagnostics allow many fathers to gain intensive media access to their child. They see their child “live”; they see how it is moving, its particular body parts might be identified; the fa-

thers feel that the forms and colours moving in front of their eyes represent their child. When the future fathers are being shown the three dimensional ultrasound videos in 1:1 ratio, this equalization of the picture medium and the body of a child is fascinating. These videos are viewed by many fathers as a revelation of a mystery of life (cf. Tegethoff, 2010).

Birth

The birth is a physical and simultaneously social event, whose consequences are that the newborn enters the community of the family. While, according to today's standards, during conception, and eventually the birth itself, both man and women interact equally, it is the development of the unborn that is undeniably entangled with the body of the woman. This is why the birth of the baby represents an inseparable bond with the woman's body. From a physical perspective, pregnancy and birth are possible with a female body. For a long time these were to a large extent a woman's concern, who perceived it this way in a patriarchal society in order of men (Fuhs, 2007), who were in most cases not present at the birth (Labouvie, 2007). A fundamental change only took place here in recent decades. Today birth is considered a common issue between the man and the woman. Based on this fact future fathers participate jointly in the birth and support their wife's physical and mental state. The new fathers therefore make an effort to realise what is expected of them and seek their place at the event of the birth. This is why they often have a feeling of merely being *a witness of the event* and not an active participant.

Many future fathers are strongly involved in the choice of the clinic, eventually the designated birth place. Together with their wives, they inspect the selected birth clinics and decide jointly where the birth of their child will take place. Besides the place itself, the timing of the birth also plays a significant role, which, for example, is being set precisely in cases of a caesarean section. It is different during natural births where the timing is often unsure. In cases of expected natural births many men emphasize the importance of being close to their wives at the right moment in order to accompany them during the pains of the birth process. In some clinics the fathers are involved in the birth in the sense that they are given the option to cut the umbilical cord. Many fathers are not

aware, however, of the significant symbolic meaning of their actions. Cutting the umbilical cord separates the mother and child, it thus turns a dyad into a triad and is made for other social forms. Many women sense the presence of their husbands during the birth as a strong relief. Many men experience pregnancy and birth as events which “glue them and their wives together” and thus they form an important basis for the family community.

Life shortly after the birth

In the period shortly after the birth immense differences are revealed between fathers and mothers that already have one or more children and those who have their first child. Among men who are already fathers for a longer period of time a confidence is shown in relation to the efforts and obstacles of that time. These fathers know that the mutual life focuses on the newborn child and their daily routine will change again (cf. Baader 2008). Some fathers participate in men or father group sessions that help them to deal with the upcoming changes and interruptions. Although many fathers are well prepared emotionally, many changes and interruptions cannot be anticipated and might be experienced and overcome only in the new situation. Nevertheless, an exchange of experiences between men or fathers enables them to understand that the changes or interruptions due to the new situation are not just individual, but many problems are also structurally conditioned.

In the time shortly after the birth many fathers experience strong discomforts of living together with the newborn. At the centre of the multidimensional claims are professional and financial troubles, narrowed working possibilities, lack of sleep, intensive care and nursing demands of the newborn, jealousy of older children and the lack of time dedicated to them. In extreme circumstances, unforeseen situations bring special worries. These include moments when the baby or one of its siblings becomes sick. Then extra measures are required to keep the carefully balanced family order intact. Many fathers complain about a kind of “stress” they did not know existed until now and about the time and power deficits of parents in relation to each other. While the newborn or its siblings are mostly the centre of attention, it causes tensions and aggression between the parents.

With the demand for equal division of work between partners, the couples work out who does what task. The tasks are negotiated against the background of a few specific assignments of gender roles. In general, an equal participation of the father in childcare is accepted today among many couples. If this is not the case, the unequal task division is often explained with the pressure that lies upon men and demands to fulfil their work duties. In many cases the professional world introduces forms of traditional work division to the families. The father and mother can only resist this to a small extent in the sense that the fundamentally accepted equal participation of the father in childcare is often not realised. A lot of research shows that in the same amount of professional duties of parents there is still an unequal division of home duties and childcare in favour of men (Rosenkranz et al., 1998). Often working fathers feel that they are torn apart between their work that provides basic economic capital for the family and the care and nursing of their children.

Because of the fact that the birth of a child initiates a process of transformation of a man into a father and a woman into a mother, a readiness of the parents is required to embrace the vast array of changes. Each of them has to leave behind usual habits or at least put them aside for a long time. The dynamics of interaction within the couple change continuously. If, up to now, the relationship was defined by wishes, interests and behaviour patterns of the woman or the man, the child steps in as a new player who demands the attention and care from parents alike. This leads to a situation where virtually nothing that was of interest to the couple earlier finds the same interest at the moment. Instead of this the fatherly or motherly attention is being put towards the child. In this process differences and conflicts emerge between mothers and fathers. Even though equal attention shown by the partner towards the child is accepted by both parents, the father and the mother often understand different things under this term.

A special problem revealed in many cases as a consequence of pregnancy and birth is the erotic desire of the mother for some time is shifted from the husband to the child without a decrease in the husband's desire of the wife in the same manner. Through this a difference is raised between the man and woman which is felt by many men as hard to overcome. When a couple does not succeed to take control, the problems often escalate in this period, conflicts and interruptions emerge which in the course of time might lead to a split. Some couples

seem to be aware of this threat. To what extent they manage to tame them is an open question.³

In general a child is an outcome of a couple's relationship. Simultaneously it transforms this couple into a family community in which the movements of desire mix all over again in a new way. How this transformation takes place is defined differently in every family constellation. In a partner-like organisation of a family different emotional conditions are built up contrary to families with a more traditional division of work. The partner-like organised families find it very difficult to live the connection between being together and differentiation, which are necessary for their integrity. In the traditionally organised families there is a clear division of tasks and work between the man and the woman, within which the man is responsible for the material income of the family and its outside contacts, whereas the woman is responsible for the care and upbringing of the children. This division of work defines the relationship of being together and differentiation between the parents. In such a structured family, Freud saw a central duty of the father in the interruption of the family- favoured dyad between the woman and the child in order to create the possibilities of having a self-conscious life. This task of the father is just as important for the traditional families, it seems that the mother-child dyad in a partner-like organisation of contemporary families does not have the same significance as in the more traditional ones.

Because of the birth and breastfeeding there also exists today a dyadic relationship between the mother and the child. However, in partner-like organised families the father plays a role very early on as a relationship person for the children. In this family structure the relationship of the child towards the father, i.e. a person outside the mother-child dyad, gains significant importance. Our research (Wulf et al., 2008) and other studies point out that it is possible for the newborn from very early on to develop its independent relationship with its own father and other people (Lupton & Barclay, 1995; Zaouche-Goudron, 2001; Sellenet, 2005; Metzger, 2008). When small children are being nursed by mother and father in the same way it seems that they perceive them as some

³ According to the Federal Bureau for Statistic Research in 2006 among the population of 3.6 million people living in Berlin there were 35,500 families with children under the age of 18. This number included: traditional married couples, non-married couples and single parents. Depending on the district of the city around one third of the families are single parents.

sort of a “parent unit” which “slowly is being enriched through the two fundamental differentiation criteria of generation and gender order within which the child finds its first self-definitions” (Allert, 1998, p. 255).

Most couples today represent a visible awareness of the central significance of the father in the development of their children. This is why in the interview in our research the following aspects are presented (Wulf, 2008, p. 91f): (1) Fathers have to care about their children, to do something in their company, but cannot narrow their care to the mutual activities. (2) They might set the limits better for their children which are necessary for their development, without which their children might have great difficulties to fit in and build up orders and structures. (3) Fathers are necessary in the first place in conflicts with adolescent children. (4) They are necessary for the gender development of their children. (5) Fathers are important for the development of the ability of their children to face conflicts.

This assumption of the central significance of fathers for the upbringing is among many families connected to the notion that children have to learn to live with “the troubles of other family constellations” which are based to a large extent on the structure and the related duties of the family and less on the faults of particular people. When it is possible for the father or mother to tame these problems after the birth it seems to be a contribution to the long-lasting securing of family relations.

Outcome

Our research and the considerations resulting from it make it clear that many fathers see the pregnancy, birth and the months thereafter as an extremely important time in their lives, during which they turn from a man into a father. Simultaneously, many of them embrace the fact of what an enrichment the children are for their own personal development. In these months the fathers are undergoing consequent transformation processes which demand certain efforts and are sometimes painful. In the process, they train new practices of fatherhood in the living together. As long as men and women might be brought into the familiar community equally and the relationship between the genders is seen as partner-like, there are some good presumptions to develop new forms of

familiar community which allow fathers to have a greater participation in the everyday life of their families. Many troubles are based on the fact, however, that there are numerous experiences with these new situations of the familiar life, but these situations are not anchored in the emphasized life forms life models structurally. This leads to a situation where under the pressure of the professional duties many fathers and mothers cannot fulfil the wish to have more time to spend with their children. In this situation many contradictory wishes, desires and experiences clash which have to be confronted and balanced by fathers and mothers. Because of the fact that there are no more generally applicable living forms, every familiar community has to develop its own model of living together, which offers both parents the possibility to live through the similarities and differences existing between them. In the process, mothers and fathers also realise how important it is for the continued existence of the familiar community that they are able to maintain the mutual attractiveness as a man and a woman.

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