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CHALLENGES TO THE SOCIAL NORMS ON REPRODUCTION: "IRREPLACEABLE MOTHER" AND AFFIRMATIVE FATHERHOOD[1]

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Abstract: This study presents an analysis of recent developments in fathers' roles in Slovakia, a country that has experienced multiple social and economic transformations in post-totalitarian Central Eastern Europe. Data from a qualitative study (14 focus group discussions, 87 participants) show that the social norms associated with the Second Demographic Transition do not constitute a homogenous unit. Young people delay reproduction due to numerous needs. A new norm is emerging—the necessity of establishing a family only once a state of economic independence has been reached. The study discusses the role of the "irreplaceable mother" and the problem of the complementarity of parental roles, shifts in negative stereotypes about men, and emerging forms of affirmative fatherhood.

Key words: social norms; reproduction; father; stereotype; gender.

Introduction and theoretical framework

Slovakia is a small Central Eastern European country which, in many respects, may be considered typical of the emerging new democracies in Eastern Europe—having recently had to vigorously pursue economic growth (but still having a relatively low GDP per capita (18,049 USD in 2013)[2], as well as strive to improve democracy. It is still strongly influenced by traditional values and the persistence of rural lifestyles (Schwartz, Bardi, & Bianchi, 2000). This paper presents findings from an empirical study on fathers' roles in a period characterized by multifold social transformations—the deceleration of rapid social change following the transition from an authoritarian communist regime to democracy, the onset of the Second Demographic Transition, and the acceleration of political claims for real gender equity—to mention the most influential ones.

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[2] data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD (June 15, 2015)

Slovakia, along with the majority of countries espousing a Western culture, faces a low reproduction rate and the postponement of fertility to a later age. Slovakia is currently affected by a Second Demographic Transition (SDT; see below), which only fully came into being in this geopolitical region after the political transformation that followed the Velvet Revolution in 1989—as is the case with other post-socialist countries in Central Europe. Slovakia is one of the countries exhibiting lowest low fertility (total fertility dropped below 1.3 several years ago and is currently slightly more than 1.4 children per woman of reproductive age). Delayed parenthood is often accompanied by the postponement of marriage and stable long-term partnerships.

Fatherhood and motherhood through the perspective of social norms

Social science research on parenthood may be grounded in different theoretical approaches. Our theoretical perspective mainly draws on (1) the social norm approach, and (2) the identification of gender stereotypes vs. gender equity, and gendered parental roles, taking account of the historical development of father identity.

Why is it important to view partnerships, marriages and parenthood through the prism of social norms? Norms represent shared ways of thinking, desiring, deciding and acting, which can be observed in regularly repeated behavior and are adopted since it is believed that they will enable certain problems to be resolved (Critto, 1999). Or, as Bicchieri (2006) puts it, norms, characterized by a discursive presence in the society and the fact that the majority of the population identify with them are the embodiment of the values and collective desires of society. Understood in this way, then, norms influence our decisions relating to partnerships, parenthood and reproduction. Moreover, norms seem to be a better predictor of behavior than individual notions and attitudes concerning the family and children. For instance, several studies (cf. Pakosta, 2009) have documented an enormous gap or inconsistency between planned and actual conceptions. On the other hand a considerable proportion of the literature on norms stresses a strong correlation between people's normative beliefs and their behaviour (Bicchieri & Muldon, 2014). Bicchieri (2006) has argued that norm compliance is best explained by conditional preferences for two different kinds of expectations: an empirical expectation that a sufficient number of people in a given population conform to the behavioural rule, and the normative expectation that other people expect we will conform to the moral norm as well, and may punish transgression.

In several European countries there is striking empirical evidence that highly educated women favor new norms concerning the postponement of childbearing to a later age (on average at around the age of 30) and most enjoy the advantages of SDT (Mills et al., 2011). The greatest benefit young people derive from delaying reproduction is independence. Arnett (2000) refers to the period between the ages of 18 and 25 as *emerging adulthood*, which is characterized by a relative independence in terms of social roles and normative expectations and at the same time by being able to experiment with relationships, job opportunities and worldviews. Fukuyama (1999) stresses that the period from the mid-1960s to the early 1990s

[3] For a more detailed comparison of parenthood and reproductive behaviour in the light of SDT and social norms see Popper (2012).

was characterized in Western societies by a weakening of social bonds and common values, disruption of social norms and the decreasing status of the family. In addition, fertility fell to very low levels, there were fewer marriages and births, and the number of children born out-of-wedlock increased substantially. One of the most comprehensive concepts is that known as Second Demographic Transition (SDT), first proposed by Lesthaeghe and Kaa (1986). In its current form it is primarily characterized by the following (Lesthaeghe, 2010): a rise in the age of first marriages, in the level of divorce, cohabitation, parenthood within cohabitation, individual autonomy, self-actualization, symmetry in gender roles, and at the same time a decline in the number of married couples, remarriages, fertility, social cohesion and acknowledgment of authority. The SDT began in the latter half of the twentieth century in the US and Scandinavia and gradually spread, firstly to other Western European countries and later also to Central and Southern Europe and to Eastern Europe[3].

Current social norms stress the incompatibility of educational and parental trajectories and prioritize establishing a family once the individuals concerned have completed their education, have stable jobs and their own housing (Potančoková, 2009b). Social norms may differ across various educational, professional and cultural subpopulations as well as between genders. Choosing whether or not to conceive a child has different consequences for men and women and that is true even in the most gender-equal societies in the Scandinavian countries. Women face greater significant changes linked with motherhood, mostly concerning leaving the parental home, education and work (Kokko et al., 2009).

Gender stereotypes, equality, and gendered parental roles

According to Badinter (1992) the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century which occurred apace until the economic crises of the 1920s and 1930s meant that the father became a figure with a doubly negative label within the family and among children, and ultimately in society. First of all hired labor meant the man and father of the family became inaccessible. The new way in which work was organized led to the emergence of distinct gender roles. Whereas in the eighteenth century men and women had worked alongside each other on the farm, at market or in the store, helped by their children, fifty years later the world had split into two disjointed spheres that barely communicated with each other: a private family sphere controlled by the mother and a public and professional sphere that was unquestionably a male domain. The fashion that prevailed was of a good mother dedicated to her children both in body and soul, and now responsible not only for feeding but also for bringing up and educating her children ("the irreplaceable mother").

However, as Badinter (ibid.) argues, the industrial revolution also eroded the patriarchal power of the father. With the emergence of the bourgeoisie, the image of the punishing father was replaced by one of a loving father. The traditional male values were reassessed and physical force and honor were replaced with success, money and work. According to

[4] The idea of push-pull mechanisms as relating to the attraction of and rejection to different, opposing social structures, was first used in the social sciences by Ravenstein (1885). Here, we apply this concept to capture the complex nature of roles-and-responsibilities of gender-emancipating mothers in relation to their partners/spouses.

Badinter, by the end of the nineteenth century the traumatization of men was reaching a peak. In reality, though, it was not until the economic crisis of 1929 that the abasement of men was to occur. Unemployed men spent long hours at home, losing their self-confidence and feeling unneeded.

Several decades later gender emancipation led to the emergence of the concept of "new men", who help around the home and look after the children. They are civilized but their strength is still prioritized. This is not, however, a muscular or claw-like strength, but is manifested in patience and emotional depths (Moir & Moir, 1998).

Cheal (2008, p. 63) considers the multiple interactions between different aspects of parenting, household engagement, employment and their balance in heterosexual couples and implicitly suggests a framework of fathers' orthogonal bipolar dimensions, which can be used to plot the constellation of parents' aspects and thus predict a particular type of fathering: (1) strong or weak commitment to work, (2) stable or unstable relationship with the woman, and (3) satisfactory or unsatisfactory previous encounters with children. If, for example, weak commitments to paid work are coupled with a stable marital relationship and pleasure in interactions with children, then we can predict an involved fatherhood.

Similarly, Hertz (1999) has identified two constellations where parents manage best to maintain equal commitments to both paid employment and domestic responsibilities and parenting. The first relates to couples with middle-managerial or professional positions who hold the belief that equal parental contributions to child-rearing constitute a superior strategy. The second constellation, which has a relatively egalitarian balance of employment and family responsibilities, relates to blue-collar men (typically workers whose jobs have been affected by economic restructuring) who are underemployed or able to arrange their shifts according to the needs of the family.

Cheal, and Hertz, thus at least implicitly assume that a strong commitment to work is incompatible with a strong commitment to parenting. They see no other option as to how to manage self-fulfillment in both working and family life. Paradoxically, these views encourage gender imbalances, because according to the authors if one of the parents wants to be successful at work, he or she has no chance of being a good parent. And since every family needs material and financial resources and at the same time a loving and caring atmosphere, it follows that the couple should strictly divide their roles in order to fulfill both requirements.

The gender-sensitive approach to parenting traditionally highlights the phenomenological difference in the "substance" out of which fatherhood and motherhood are socially constructed. This is currently one of the main obstacles to sharing parental roles fairly. Fatherhood is traditionally constructed as being culturally shaped, as being a unique virtue, and the result of individual will, while the substance of motherhood is constructed as being natural and originating in the reproductive potential of women (Kiczková, 2006). The search for a fair parental arrangement, however, requires a more comprehensive approach. While there is a general shift toward gender equality, an ambivalence, or push-pull dynamic[4] predominates among women in relation to their status at home. On the one hand, they wish to keep their dominant parental position and their identity as woman-mother (and they therefore question men's/fathers' abilities to care for small children); on the other hand, women want to actualize themselves through work that might bring them satisfaction, and therefore need fathers to be involved in childcare.

In Central European countries women do not like to relinquish their roles as mothers, as the main childrearer, for fear that they might lose their feminine identity, which is associated with motherhood (Janoušková & Sedláček, 2005). It is partly for this reason that there is still a very strong discourse on the irreplaceable mother and her "helper" (the father). This was investigated in detail by Grňo (2006). He has demonstrated how this discourse can be identified not only in records on family interactions, but also within textbooks on developmental psychology, in various psychological studies, and in legislation. The discourse on the irreplaceable mother "defines the person who has mother status as someone who cannot be absent during the nurturing of the child, and defines the helper as someone who helps nurture the child, but whose absence would not be such a catastrophe as would be the absence of the person who has mother status … the helper remains a helper and the mother oversees the helper's work providing instruction and praise, while the helper seeks advice…" (Grňo, 2006, p.4). This type of discourse perpetuates traditional gender role divisions and at the same time significantly contributes to the distrust women have of men as fully-fledged fathers, thereby strengthening the negative stereotype on the competency of the father. Moreover, in both the Czech Republic (Hašková & Zamykalová, 2006) and Slovakia (Potančoková, 2009a), the norm of several years (three years is optimal) spent at home bringing up the child full-time is considered to be the most appropriate form of motherhood and to constitute the obligations of a good mother. Even today women in post-communist Slovakia fear that they may be labeled as careerists, with all the word's negative connotations, and so they suppress the importance of work during in-depth interviews or avoid the topic (Potančoková, 2009a). If the mother goes back to work earlier, then it is expected that she will ensure that the child is cared for consistently by a single reliable person who will satisfy the child's emotional needs, providing a sense of security and stability; most often this person is a grandmother, not the father (ibid.).

So far we have outlined the three cornerstones underpinning the prevailing social norms concerning parenthood. The first is the norm of postponing childbearing to a later age, the second is reducing gender differences or asymmetry in parental roles, while the third norm is that of the "irreplaceable mother", which remains very strong.

Research objective

Our research objectives were to explore the main normative topics concerning fatherhood and motherhood. In order to create an analytical structure, the normative topics can be arranged into two main groups. The first refers to **reproductive delay.** The second group refers to **the gender construction of expected parental interactions** in relationships.

Our research questions were: (1) How is the reproductive **delay norm** being manifested, what are the specific forms it takes, and what are the reasons and justifications for delaying reproduction? (2) What kind of normative expectations concerning gendered parental and professional roles (and their interaction) are present, and how are these **gender a/symmetry norms** constructed? (3) How is **parental responsibility** perceived in the context of the still present norm of "irreplaceable mother"?

Method

In our study we conducted 14 focus group discussions with young men (M; N=48) and women (F; N=39), aged 20-34; 7 groups were all male (M), 4 were all female (F) and 4 were mixed (Mix). The participants were students with varying levels of education (high school, undergraduate, graduate, and post-graduate) and young employed persons. We focused on young people who delay reproduction in order to pursue a university education or accumulate the material resources required to support a future family. Some of the employed participants were still completing their university studies. Eight of the participants were parents. Five of the focus group discussions were conducted in Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia—four of them on different university campuses, and one with a group of males with above-average earnings. Seven focus group discussions were conducted at university campuses in two smaller towns in western Slovakia (Nitra and Trnava). The last two discussions were conducted in another small town in western Slovakia (Vrbové) with participants who were in employment. Recruitment was carried out using the snow-ball technique, as well as via invitation by university lecturers. Each focus group consisted of 5-8 participants, and was run by two researchers who had different roles (one leading the discussion and the other taking additional notes and coming up with supplementary questions). The discussions were semi-structured, following a scenario focusing on following themes: the participants' lifestyles (and as compared to their parents' lifestyles), life-goals, fecundity (reproductive intentions), the nature of their existing and expected partner roles and parental roles, matching work and family engagement, and normative opinions on parenthood. All the discussions were audio-recorded. Once the verbal data had been fully transcribed, it was subjected to a thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998; Joffe & Yardley, 2004). This method is "compatible with both essentialist and constructionist paradigms" and "provides a flexible and useful research tool, which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 5). Specifically, the relevant and most salient data were coded, labelled and organized into a set of categories. In order to obtain a rich thematic description of all the data, the categories were drawn up on the basis of the theoretical stance outlined and our research questions, and from emerging patterns (themes) that reoccurred during the focus group discussion. The inductive analysis was more prominent which means that the process of categorization was more data than theoretically driven. Codes were checked and discussed by at least by two researchers (raters) and during this time the categories were refined.

Results

Our analysis focuses on three main topics—(1) delaying parenthood, (2) gender constructions of (expected) parental interactions, and (3) responsibility of mothers and fathers.

Delay

In the focus group discussions when seeking to establish how the reproductive delay norm is manifested and the specific forms it takes, and the reasons and justifications for delaying reproduction, we were able to identify a broad range of statements relating to delay that substantiated its normative potency regarding reproduction.

The women and men manifested an awareness of men **enjoying the delay in terms of self-actualization, experimenting with/in relationships, and exploring job opportunities** etc.:

C: In my opinion young guys today grow up a lot later than they used to and they are more liberal than we perhaps are and they want to have fun and not tie themselves down and get married until they're in their thirties, and as for children well I won't even say when... (Nitra5 F; F)

E: I can't imagine having a child. I still want to live my life and anyway I don't have the resources yet to bring up my own child and look after a family. (Nitra1Mix; M)

Some women responded to this delay in male reproductive intentions by seeking older men.

D: That's why you have these relationships now where the woman is five or six years younger, because she's looking for a more responsible man, who'll look after her, who's responsible. (Nitra5 F; F)

The other justification for delaying fatherhood—the need to provide materially for the family—was highlighted mainly by male participants:

B: I can't imagine having a child and whatever happens, ... I basically need to have something put by so that I could look after it even if I lost my job, so that I would have a couple of months to get by on until I found another job, so I wouldn't have to go asking my parents for money, to give me something because I can't feed my kid. (STU M; M)

Some participants, despite enjoying the delay, displayed a readiness to switch to the "responsible" pattern, giving up their university studies and earning money in order to provide for the family if a child was to be born:

B: If it happened and let's say it was a proper relationship and the women got pregnant, well then I think I would be one hundred percent prepared, ready to adjust my financial and biological lifestyle, and be prepared to be a parent and a partner. (Bratislava M; M)

Finally, a third reason for delaying reproduction was given in the discussions—relating to the incompatibility of parenting and a professional career; before starting on reproductive life young adults think their professional career has to be sufficiently developed:

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 M; M)

These interview extracts tell us that men try to postpone reproduction to a later period so that they can seek self-actualization. If, however, unplanned parenthood were to happen, they state that they would be prepared to take care of the child. The increasing popularity of the norm of "first work, then a child" also indicates more of a tendency to behave responsibly by building up the family's finances first to prevent economic suffering. The identity of the father as breadwinner still has strong roots in Slovakia and thus contributes implicitly to women maintaining a normative reciprocal role—the role of mother.

Gender role norms

Gender issues related to reproductive intentions were observed in the focus group discussions on two levels—household-roles and parenthood-roles. Participants expressed a wide range of opinions, from traditional gender stereotypical expectations to completely abandoning gender stereotypes and declaring a kind of affirmative fatherhood.

A preference for traditional stereotypical gender divisions over household roles was expressed frequently and by both male and female participants, as the following quotes illustrate:

> *B: The partner I live with now, out of all the previous partners I lived with—there were two—she is the most ideal in terms of dividing roles. She said that she would take on all the usual female roles herself but that if I didn't like something and wanted to do it then I could. It's a good life for me. (Bratislava M; M)*

> *F: For me the relationship has worked out that when my partner wants something done at home or the flush fixed then of course she calls me and then because I've done something she feels the need to cook and so that then is like her role. (Bratislava M; M)*

> *A: Well the woman usually looks after the house, cooking, ironing, washing, but I think the man should help out a bit more and not be surprised later that the woman is stressed, or like when the man comes from work and lies on the settee and everything is up to her. Like he should help the woman a bit more, fine, he doesn't have to iron, but everyone can do something, a bit of hoovering now and again or do the things that are more physically difficult for the woman for example. (Nitra 4 Mix; F)*

The same gender-traditional role divide was also evident in parental roles—expressed again by both male and female participants. In this context it sets a normative role of father as just a helper to the woman-mother:

> *C: I think he should be supportive. To support the woman, so that he can help her ... he comes home from work and instead of going and watching the telly or whatever, he should take over from the woman and look after the child and she can have a rest when he comes home... (Nitra 6 M; M)*

> *A: But I wouldn't force him to do the woman's job, but just if it was needed, so for example I'm not at home now so he should be able to take my place ... Earning money, that's the most important thing. Of course he should financially support the family when I'm on maternity leave for example but he should also know the basic things, like taking over from me when I need him to. (Nitra 5 F; F)*

Some male participants expressed a moderate deconstruction of gender stereotypes concerning the household role-divide:

> *A: I also lived on my own for quite a while, I learnt everything, but after a while it stopped being fun and I got to the stage where what am I going to clean for when I don't have to? But on the other hand it is a positive thing, a girl comes and she know that the guy knows how to do everything himself, but she washes better or more economically and tidies up more often... (Bratislava M; M)*

A similar moderate deconstruction—concerning parental roles—was expressed as follows by both male and female participants:

A: I don't even think it's possible if the married couple don't both fill in for each other, because basically the wife comes home from work at five or so, if she is also commuting then the husband has to take on some of the chores too... (STU M; M)

G: So that it's not all down to just the wife and so that he's by my side for each step of the way, whether at school, at nursery, or in general, so that he's also friends with the child and so that both parents do it together. (Nitra 5F; F)

We also observed references to a decline in traditional gender roles. Male and female participants alike sharply deconstructed a gender stereotypical norm concerning household and parental roles:

C: For example I grew up in a family and still do where my father cooks and when mum tidies up they basically help each other and I can rely on them both, there's nothing like I would be frightened of my father or anything, maybe I'm more scared of my mum ... I don't know, it should be shared and it shouldn't be down to ... Both should equally look after the home and the family and especially the children. (Nitra 4 Mix; F)

B: Personally I think that there's been a kind of shift away from the past as far as bringing up the children is concerned ... now it's no problem for fathers bring up their little kids, they can give them a bath themselves, change their nappies and take them for walks and have fun with them, basically these days some fathers go on paternity leave instead of the mothers, which was definitely not so obvious before. (Trnava Mix; M)

Finally, there were male participants who expressed a very strong fatherhood position—abandoning gender stereotypes as such, and expressing gender equality in parenthood and childcare in an affirmative way:

A: I, for example, wouldn't have any problem being on paternity leave and looking after the child in the first few months or years and she could work a bit and I would stay at home. In that way I'm completely liberal. I would really like to try it and it's of interest to me because I've read some studies where it's actually the fathers who stay with the children after birth that have even stronger relationships with the children later on. I would really like it to be like that. (Bratislava M; M)

C: I would even request it [paternity leave]. I have the right as a father, don't I? And who has the right to take away two years of my life with my son or daughter? It's discrimination, men having to go to work and sweat... (Bratislava M; M)

These extracts document the broad diversity of the discourse on gender roles concerning housework and child care. The so called "new fathers" seek equal opportunities and responsibilities for both men and women—staying at home on parental leave with the child and creating a strong positive attachment with the child; this feeds back and strengthens the father's role. Still, overall in the gradual steps of gender-stereotype deconstruction, there is—to varying degrees—a normative expectation that the mother should be irreplaceably present.

Responsibility of fathers and mothers

The discussions on delay and gender-balance issues in parenthood triggered another topic which emerged repeatedly during the focus groups—the discourse on the responsibility of men in their role as father. Opinions in this emerging debate were quite polarized. Many female participants stated that they could not trust men enough for them to become reliable potential fathers, as is illustrated in the quotation below:

> *C: My partner is basically a year older than me, so approximately my age and he would really like a child but you can see that he himself isn't very responsible and has problems looking after himself, I don't think he's ready to be a father yet, basically he has to be responsible so that I know that if something happens he can cope. (Nitra 3 F; F)*

Some women albeit had the opposite experience:

> *A: If I wasn't at university I could see myself [having a child] now, I've got no problem with that, because my partner's someone you can rely on, definitely, so there would be no problem. (Nitra 3 F; F)*

Men perceive female criticism of them in two ways. Firstly, they question the responsibility of both men and women who have children at a young age, and think young women are deluding themselves if they think they can adopt the role of an accomplished mother:

> *A: A 20 year old girl can't want a guy of the same age to start a family in a year's time and have a child and expect the guy to know what parenthood is. I personally think that she herself doesn't know what's waiting for her. So we men can basically say the same of women. She can of course say that we don't know, but equally I could say that she herself doesn't know what she wants or what she will do. (Nitra 6 M; M)*

> *A: so I think every woman thinks that ... that she is perfect and that the man knows nothing, so I think that view is quite distorted. (Nitra 6 M; M)*

The other counter-argument men have against women who argue they are untrustworthy is articulated by participants who are willing to or who in fact do sacrifice the majority of their energy on parenting:

> *F: I've had a girlfriend for three years and I wouldn't take it [an unplanned pregnancy] like that, she's the only one so far and I hope that it's like that for her, so I'm not saying that I would be devastated, but that I would immediately start thinking about whether I should stop studying and find a job quickly ... and go back to studying later, once I'd got things back on an even keel, I'd catch up somehow... Perhaps I'd even finish the year, well it's almost over, or do distance learning or anything, but really just think up some way so that the kid would have enough to live on. (Nitra 6 M; M)*

> *G: I pretend that I'm a political scientist, but really I'm a babysitter. I don't know anyone who looks after their kids more than me. (Trnava Mix; M)*

The discourse on responsibility is constructed from two positions: the first concerns only men and it argues the case for and against their responsibility, while the second involves both

men and women and questions whether women are in fact more responsible (parents) than men. The critical part of the discourse points to the fact that responsibility is not a gender issue, since less responsible parents can be found among women and men. In both of these discursive positions, however, there is an implicit normative presumption of women being the ones responsible in issues of parenthood.

Discussion and conclusions

Our data suggest that the social norms associated with the Second Demographic Transition do not constitute a single homogenous unit in Slovakia. It is evident that both male and female undergraduates and postgraduates delay or plan to delay reproduction, in keeping with the findings of Arnett (2000) and Potančoková (2009b), mainly because of a need to self-actualize, gain education, pursue a professional career, and because of endeavors to be financially and materially secure before conceiving a child. The normative pressure to delay may be weaker among women who, seeking security in relationships, opt for partners who are 4-6 years older than them. Underlying this strategy is an assumption that older men are not only better equipped materially but are also more mature and responsible. Thus, generally, a new norm is emerging that stresses the need to establish a family only once a state of economic independence has been reached, but that at the same time, allows for a wide range of self-actualizations (in work, life, partnerships etc). This applies mainly to young people with higher education.

Most of our participants' statements show that what dominates is neither traditional (gender stereotypical) nor new (gender equal) social norms. Instead, in order to obtain greater independence and create a larger space for self-realization, women tend to pull men into the sphere that has traditionally been the domain of women—housekeeping and child nurturing. Simultaneously, however, they want, as Janoušková and Sedláček (2005) found, to maintain their leading position in the household and therefore view men as their assistants instead of full-blooded substitutes. This fully demonstrates the push-pull dynamics which have been active since pre-modern times, reinforced throughout modernity (cf. Badinter, 1992) and in the present period.

Men, on the other hand, mostly take on the role of apprentices who are able to learn much of women's traditional role, but only to a certain extent, and only when it is essential that they stand in for their female partners/wives. Thus, the underlying norm of "irreplaceable mother" suggested by Grňo (2006) is still being reinforced—be it in a stereotypical direction or as part of the emancipation of women.

When entering the domain of parenting roles, there is much greater ambivalence concerning the norms of fatherhood and motherhood. On the one hand the trend for traditional social norms, where the men are the breadwinners and the women run the home, still persists. On the other hand few women or men expressed very strong determination to radically challenge these expectations in favor of a highly egalitarian norm of parenthood. Our data show that the normative representation of issues relating to reproduction in young adults in Slovakia is highly differentiated and covers a broad range of positions—be that in the area of parenthood or the way the couple divide up household roles. They can be placed along a continuum starting with preferences for gender-stereotyped roles originating

during the industrial revolution (Badinter, 1992), and ending with fully gender-independent parental roles, permeated with "new men" characteristics (Moir & Moir, 1998). Further, we can identify a kind of "affirmative fatherhood" favored by men who have the impression that the social norm of an irreplaceable mother resulting in female dominance in parenthood might restrict their right to intimacy with their offspring. Our findings do not support the observations of Cheal (2008) who found low parenting gender-role segregation to be associated mainly with fathers' low work-commitments, stable partnerships with the mother and satisfactory interaction with the children. Instead they point to interaction between the father and mother as being a deciding factor in their expectations on the extent of stereotypes, or the extent to which traditional father and mother roles had been deconstructed. Thus, it is not only about the extent to which parents agree to deconstruct these but also about their ability to adjust their gender settings just as new men were thought to have done (Moir & Moir, 1998).

Hand-in-hand with the push-pull "dilemma", there is an ongoing discourse on the nature of motherhood and fatherhood: Must they be complementary? What kind of complementarity is best—should it be aimed at traditional gendered roles or be the subject of free negotiation? What are the advantages of role-complementarity when compared to individual parenting? Our data seem to support a tendency towards a "new" complementarity—favoring a restricted mother-father role complementarity, with a high proportion of flexibility in parental roles in both parents providing optimal conditions for both. The traditional normative model of the mother and father is being substituted by a variety of parent models that should be deliberated by the parents to ensure a sufficient degree of (new) complementariness. This is, moreover, supported by our findings challenging the normative presumption of women being the ones responsible in issues relating to parenthood; parental responsibility seems not to be a gendered issue, since different levels of parental responsibility can be found among women and men.

Our study also shows that alongside the ideal reproductive age norm—mainly a consequence of young adults' strong need for self-actualization, social norms are emerging in relation to reproductive responsibility, securing the material basis for the family and the child and one's value on the labor market. In men primarily, these efforts are amplified by the ever-present stereotype of the father as breadwinner. The social norm of irreplaceable mother is still present, in spite of the diverse challenges confronting it; surprisingly, it is more apparent in the young women's arguments and less so in the young men's. Consistent with this, we found that insofar as the range of different levels of gender-stereotype deconstruction is concerned, the strongest challenge was evident in the responses of male participants who formulated a kind of "affirmative fatherhood", demanding equal pleasure from childrearing as do mothers.

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