Parenting within Homelessness:
A Qualitative Study on the Situation
of Homeless Fathers and Social Work
in Homeless Support Services in Vienna

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> **Abstract_** *The relationship between homelessness and male parenting is rarely discussed in the professional discourse on family homelessness. There are few international empirical studies that analyse the relationship between homeless men and their children. This paper is based on a one-year exploratory research project, which was financed by the University of Applied Sciences FH Campus Wien and carried out in 2013 and 2014. The qualitative study aimed to explore the situation of homeless non-resident fathers living in transitional shelters and tried, furthermore, to reconstruct their parenting and constructions of masculinity from a gender critical viewpoint. The study paid particular attention to the parent-child relationship, parental practices, the housing situation and the support services of the social work staff. The results indicate that housing shelters represent an important resource for sustaining a relationship between homeless men and their children. They are characterized simultaneously by a wide range of control mechanisms and by a lack of privacy and adequate spaces for children. The study has further shown that the homeless support services mainly concentrate on the restoration of inde-pendent living and thus rarely address psychosocial topics such as parenting. Furthermore, the men seem to develop new forms of parent-hood, which are not necessarily reflected upon as such, nor are they integrated into future ideas of parental practices. Under the enormous pressure of homelessness and the experience of acute poverty, men strive to recreate their own social status and draw on established notions of normality, such as the nuclear family and men being responsible for its financial wealth. Thus, the establishment of different long-term parental*

practices proves to be difficult. We, therefore, suggest intensive psychoso-
cial and gender-reflective support measures to dissolve polarized gender
arrangements and facilitate greater compatibility between care work and
market-mediated work, within the men's perceptions of parenthood.

Introduction

Research in the field of homelessness often explicitly or implicitly focuses on men as the norm due to their greater visibility, while gender relations and masculinity are hardly dealt with. This indicates a gender bias and can be described as 'gender blindness within men's studies' (Harner *et al.*, 2013). It is noteworthy that within social work theory and practice, homeless men are seldom addressed as parents, which suggests hegemonic gender perceptions and related selectiveness within the support system. The limited international studies about support systems for homeless people indicate that fathers who are single parents and not accommodated with their children or who are social fathers largely remain invisible (McArthur *et al.*, 2006; Paquette and Bassuk, 2009; Barker *et al.*, 2011). The relationship between male homelessness and parenting is barely discussed within international academic literature, and only a few empirical studies try to sketch the relationships between homeless men and their children or their parental lifestyle in such precarious situations (for an overview, see Arhant *et al.*, 2013).

In this respect, questions about 1) changes in family relationships, parental activities and tasks, 2) the influence of the institutional context within the transitional shelters of the homeless support services on parenting, or 3) the dynamics within the support relationships between social workers and homeless men, point toward a wide and scarcely researched field of study. This one-year exploratory research project was situated in this context. It was financed by the University of Applied Sciences FH Campus Wien and carried out in 2013 and 2014 (see Diebäcker *et al.*, 2015; Harner *et al.*, 2015).

Gender-Critical Men's Studies in Marginalised Contexts

This study focuses on masculinity and fatherhood and is positioned in the field of critical gender studies. We understand critical gender studies as a process by which gender power relations are made the subject of research, without reproducing them. Our interest, therefore, does not lie solely in how individuals are made to become gendered subjects, but also in "how they exist as such" (Maihofer, 1995, p.66). Thus, in this study the analysis of gender is traced in three steps: "construction – reconstruction – deconstruction" (Frey *et al.*, 2006, p.2). This is done in order to understand how gender (as a paradox category) is created and becomes effective within social practice, as well as how it can be overcome as a category of order. Moreover, an intersectional research perspective is taken and it is assumed that there is an overlapping of different categories of inequality (compare, for example, Knapp and Wetterer, 2003; Klinger *et al.,* 2007; Winker and Degele, 2009).

Men, or rather fathers, are the subject of our research, and thus our interest is focused on 'male gender' dimensions. In accordance with the concept of hegemonic masculinity (compare, for example, Carrigan *et al.,* 2001 [1985]; Connell, 2000; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005) we distance ourselves from the understanding of 'men' as a homogenous group.

Generally, categories of masculinity and fatherhood are discussed separately from each other in academic literature (Baur, 2007; Matzner, 2009). In men's studies, fatherhood is mostly considered in relation to the concept of the male breadwinner, failing to acknowledge "fatherhood as a set of attributions, expectations, behavioural orientation and competences" (Bereswill *et al.,* 2006, p.10). In contrast, we view fatherhood and masculinity as interconnected dimensions, contextualized within a hegemonic order. For a better understanding, it is necessary to analyse these dimensions in the sense of identity constructions, subjective concepts and societal interpellations (Matzner, 2009). Regarding a broad term of practice we prefer the term 'parenting', as we stress the connection between parental thinking and behaviour, taking the subject's perspective into account.

We assume that family represents an historically evolved construct, which is subject to constant flux, and that *the* family does not exist. On the one hand, families do meet functions for society as a whole. These functions include self-recruitment, in the sense of biological reproduction and the socialisation of its members, as well as the social positioning or placement of subjects in societal hierarchies. On the other hand, tasks and services associated with the family are discussed at the level of everyday life, which relate to individual needs or are performed in interpersonal exchange. These functions and tasks can be fulfilled by different social actors, like social fathers and mothers, or other persons regardless of their gender, and include

social, emotional and material functions (Böhnisch and Lenz, 1999). Yet, in this process, areas of responsibility are historically and culturally shaped – often through capitalistic and patriarchal processes.

Drawing on relevant literature (Böhnisch and Lenz, 1997; Werneck, 1998; Baur, 2007; Hofmeister *et al.*, 2009), we have identified seven categories for the empirical analysis of parental practices in order to differentiate between the ranges of tasks that relate to parenting. Though a differentiation has been made, the practices identified are strongly interrelated; with the term 'care function', we refer to practices that relate to the physical well-being of children in particular, such as the provision of food, physical hygiene, washing clothes or health care. The term 'financial provision' relates to activities that ensure the material revenue or welfare of the family, usually through income. Within the term 'upbringing function', activities are included that generate moral and ethical guidelines, and that result in normative interventions in the area of conflict between the child's preservation of autonomy und parental aspirations for normalization. The term 'education function' is used to mean parental conduct that supports children in their developmental processes in the sense of knowledge, skills and capabilities, such as early childhood furtherance, homework assistance or engagement at school. The term 'emotional care'*,* then, denotes interactions that are dedicated to the emotions of the child and that attend to the child's experiences and social behaviour in its relation to the outside world. The term 'leisure function' is understood to refer to activities that serve as entertainment, relaxation or pleasure, and that can usually be characterized as a context that is more informal and less functionalized. The function of 'parental protection' is less present in its physical component nowadays. It refers to the social positioning of the adult in the sense of knowledge, experience and relationships, which, as a socialising safety measure, protects the social standing of the child, even if the determining character has been weakened in present times (Werneck, 1998).

Furthermore, consideration of the societal processes of exclusion and situations of marginality are at the centre of our research perspective. In the analysis of societal fringes and of the realities of lives that are specifically problematized as deviant, on the one hand, systematic disadvantages, societal power structures and conditions of inequality can be exposed while on the other, perspectives of a more just society can be drawn up (Mohanty, 2002). At the same time, these situations of marginality – social crises, dangerous daily lives, as well as the precarious lifestyle of the subject – create the possibility of discovering gender constructions and practices beyond hegemonic stereotypes. In this process, individuals are able to reflect on "operational modes and mechanisms of social order" (Meuser, 2009, p.253) from the position of societal deviation. Especially in the area of social work, important impulses can be identified to review structures

and re-constructions of gender compositions within the context of precarious lifestyles. These include fragility and conflicting life conditions, the analysis of institutional conditions and dependencies, as well as reflections on specialist conceptions that are taken as 'matters of course'.

Qualitative Research Design

This research project was qualitative in nature, in order to generate explorative results about the parenting of fathers in situations of homelessness, as well as to analyse social work practices for this target group within homeless support services. With a focus on the subjective experiences of homeless men, we first directed our attention toward the pathways into homelessness, in order to be able, secondly, to reconstruct changes and/or continuities in social relationships, problematic situations and the needs and lifestyles of the individuals in question. Thirdly, the influence of precarious housing situations (specifically, the transitional shelters of homeless support services) on parental practices were of special interest to us. At the centre of our analysis was the relationship of support between the fathers and social workers in the homeless support services. Aside from the perspective of the service user, we focused on social workers' perceptions of homeless men's parenting. This was done in order to be able to reconstruct the conditions of the social work driven relationships, intervention approaches and as well as specialist reasoning with this target group in particular.

As part of this study we cooperated with two providers of homeless support services in Vienna – Caritas Wien and the neunerhaus, who were convinced to participate by the project targets and the research design. The four transitional shelters in this study provide transitional accommodation and support services specifically designed for a particular group of the homeless population. Examples of that group are young adults who are provided with options to stabilize their situation or persons who have completed alcohol addiction therapy. The shelters differ in whether they provide short- or longer-term support and assistance, which is due to the diverse requirements and resources of service users. In this respect, the general institutional conditions, norms and specialist concepts differ in each transitional shelter. This range of institutional contexts was deliberately chosen to capture the diversity of situations and practices, to gain deeper insights through comparisons, and to support the explorative approach of the study.

The study looks at homeless men who are not accommodated with their children, as this area represents both a research gap within the relevant academic literature and constitutes the common reality of men who have children in the homeless support services in Vienna. A further prerequisite of the study was that the men had

at least one child between the ages of 0 and 12, in order to help us understand parenting in its present significance and not only retrospectively. Young interviewers were intentionally sought to record the rarely dealt with connection between early parenting and homelessness.[1] Because of the challenging survey conditions, it can reasonably be assumed that the men who agreed to participate in the study seek or maintain contact with their children. At the same time, it is important to note that the selection criteria and the specific emphasis on the target group by the participating transitional shelters influenced the results of the study. In this process, specific social work practices or specific life situations and lifestyles of the fathers were put into focus.

The qualitative research design involved eight problem-centred interviews with fathers,[2] eight problem-centred interviews with social workers, seven theme-centred consultations between homeless men and social workers[3] as well as two group discussions.[4] Recruitment was done using the contacts of social workers who agreed to participate in the research process. They provided their personal resources and contacted potential study participants. The interviewees were recruited on a voluntary basis and asked by their case manager if they would like to participate in the study. Before the first interview took place, we, as researchers, informed the men again in detail that participation was voluntary and a confidentiality agreement was signed. We are especially thankful to the staff and residents of the four researched transitional shelters who agreed to be interviewed. Three

[1] The age of the service users interviewed was between 20 and 54 in the following distribution: 20-30 years old: 3 persons; 31-40: 2 persons; 41-50: 1 person; 51 and older: 2 persons. Between them, these men considered themselves fathers to 15 biological and 2 non-biological children. 50% of respondents had one child, while the other 50% had two or more children. The age of the children was distributed as follows: 2-6 years old: 4 children; 7-12 years old: 6 children; 13-17: 4 children; 18 and older: 3 children. All fathers lived separately from the mothers of the children and were – though to different degrees – in contact with at least one of their children.

[2] The interviewees were coordinated by social workers and agreed voluntarily to take part in the study. The theme-centred conversations took place in the common room of the respective shelters, lasted between 40 and 105 minutes and can be characterised as open conversations.

[3] The seven theme-centred consultations between service users and the respective case workers on 'perspectives on parenthood and the possibilities of shaping family relationships' were carried out without further guidelines and were recorded in the absence of the research team. The aim was to gain deeper insight into the support relationship through conversations, interactions and the themes discussed. The length of these conversations varied between 20 and 75 minutes. Only in one case did the final theme-centred consultation not take place.

[4] Each of the group discussions, with twelve staff members in total, lasted for about two hours and took place toward the end of the investigation period. Participation in the group discussion was voluntary. The make-up of the groups was decided by the teams themselves, so that ten social workers and two residence carers were represented.

case studies were provided by JUCA – Haus für junge Erwachsene (Caritas Wien), two cases each by Haus Billrothstraße (neunerhaus) and Haus Hagenmüllergasse (neunerhaus), and one case by Vinzenzhaus (Caritas Wien).

In the period between January and June 2014, 25 audio files were recorded, with a combined length of over 1,500 minutes. Two conversations were conducted in English, the others in German. They were transcribed in the respective languages [5] and transcripts subsequently underwent an interpretative analysis using the methodological perspective of the grounded theory (see, for example, Strauss, 1998). Transcripts were inserted into software for qualitative data analysis, where relevant passages were selected, reflected on and documented with memos. By following a process of open coding and inductive constructions, the analysis was systematized by mind mapping the various code relations.

Using axial and selective coding strategies, the interpretation process was intensified. A thorough investigation of the research subject was facilitated by the combination of different perspectives (of homeless men and social workers), different research methods (individual interviews, consultations and group discussions) and different research settings (interactions of researchers with subjects, interaction between the subjects). This systematic triangulation of perspectives (see, for example, Flick, 2004) was followed in eight different case contexts, in which three different datasets were positioned in relation to each other.

Causes and Pathways into Homelessness

Situations of homelessness must be understood as dynamic processes, in which interactions between structural factors and individual life circumstances are merged. These circumstances constitute decisive biographical ruptures for those concerned, in the sense of social crises, dangerous daily realities and precarious lifestyles. When these life situations are reconstructed and contextualised socially through the men's biographical pathways into homelessness, the following structural features can be identified.

A lack of integration into the labour market was a central feature of the men interviewed. Only one of the men was employed part-time, one person was unable to work and six were unemployed or looking for work. Retrospectively, the employment history of almost interviewees can be described as discontinuous. Whereas the older interviewees had experienced regular employment and the comparative material security associated with it during their lifetime, this experience was usually unknown to the younger participants.

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[5]   The interviews were transcribed by Maria Austaller, Iris Grammelhofer and Roswitha Harner.

With regard to income, all interviewees were reliant on social security service benefits or government transfer payments such as unemployment benefits and welfare. Seven of the eight interviewees had access to a monthly income of minimum needs-based benefits and thus lived at subsistence level. Some of the interviewees were indebted.

Most interviewees can be described as having impaired health, with descriptions of physical and psychological symptoms varying considerably. The interplay between psychological illnesses (i.e., depression) and addiction (here, alcoholism in particular) constituted a burden for the interviewees in terms of their current lifestyle, or retrospectively. With regard to individual pathways into homelessness, the research showed that (suddenly occurring) loss of work and unemployment, material poverty and health impairments were central structural parameters of the homelessness of the interviewees.[6]

Access to housing is very difficult for the men who were interviewed; among other things, this can be attributed in particular to the enormous cost increases in the private housing sector and the long waiting periods for public housing in Vienna.

The men interviewed described homelessness as a drastic event in an already precarious living situation; the fear of losing contact with children, the loss of a caring relationship with a former partner who often supported them in crisis situations, the loss of everyday structures that provided orientation, not having access to resources or their own living space, and the discontinuation of contact with former colleagues, relatives or neighbours are some of the aspects that increase the acute psychosocial burden of homelessness. Here, the data shows that most of the older men already had fewer socially supportive relationships before they lost their accommodation, and that family relationships, which are destabilized due to separation and moving out, are associated with a deep sense of insecurity and the weakening of self-worth. Using Robert Castels' (2000) model of social exclusion, the interviewees can be categorized as multi-dimensionally disconnected, in view of their lack of social integration through work or relationship networks.[7]

In discussing their lives prior to becoming homeless, most men talked about their former employment context, stressing their financial responsibility for providing material safety for the family and the associated breadwinner function. In this context of societal integration through work, the central importance of education is often referred to in relation to the men's children. Examples of this include having to ensure the financial resources for school or their active, everyday

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6   For example in the following interviews (See Index at end): IU1; ; IU2; IU4; IU5; IU8; IS6; IS7; IS1; IS2; IS3.

7   In, for example: IU1; IU2; IU6; IS1.

involvement in early childhood or school-age development. At the same time, most men were used to regularly spending free time with their children, albeit to a lesser degree than their former partners did. Particularly in these contexts, the emotional care involved in this parent-child contact is emphasized retrospectively, even if more significance is usually given to mothers in this respect. Educational activities, which are associated with situations of conflict, everyday confrontations or parental 'boundary setting', are also taken on more frequently by women than by the men, it seems. In this regard, very different patterns can be identified – depending on gender relations within the family system – where decision-making powers and everyday instructional practices can diverge. Parental care functions, on the other hand, seem to have been almost entirely assigned to the woman before homelessness occurred. [8]

In summary, it can be assumed that, before becoming homeless, most of the men interviewed oriented themselves along the lines of hegemonic norms for a nuclear family, which involved specifically male familial and fatherly tasks structured in line with the male role of breadwinner. From a gender relation perspective, women are ascribed the 'caring' role in terms of family and parental work, which includes primary responsibility for care work and is usually accompanied by domineering instructional and emotional caring functions. When financial difficulties emerge and poverty develops, it can be observed that the men start making demands, requesting the women to contribute to the financial security of the family. Here, the 'dual socialization' (Becker-Schmidt, 1987)[9] of women into single earner households is a result of the precarious earning capacity of the men.

The Relationships of Homeless Men with their Children

Their relationships with their children is of major significance for the interviewees, which is emphasized and expressed through emotional attachment. This becomes apparent through fear of losing them, missing the children or the desire for love and acceptance from them. [10] In most cases it emerges that the reduced day-to-day contact resulting from moving out is perceived as a central experience of loss. Accordingly, contact with the children is initially destabilized through

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[8]   In, for example: IU1; IU6; IU2; IU5; IU8.

[9]   The term 'double socialization' (doppelte Vergesellschaftung) refers to women being socialized in two social realms – wage work and reproduction work – and thus experiencing a 'double burden'. The term, developed by Regina Becker-Schmidt (1987), includes the process of how society reproduces itself and the process by which an individual becomes part of this society (see Umrath, 2010).

[10] In: IU1; IU6; IU7; IU3; IU4; IU5.

different forms of homelessness or stays in therapeutic settings. Through stabilizing their living situation and resolving family or personal crises, is it possible for the men to rebuild contact with their children. [11]

In the case of most of the interviewed men, the contact with children is strongly limited in terms of time; it takes place regularly in some cases and irregularly in others. The forms of contact range from speaking on the phone or using messaging services, to personal meetings or sleepovers by the children in the institutions of the homeless support services. On average, the fathers see their children once or twice a week, mostly at the weekends, while for the younger interviewees there is a trend of less continuity of contact than for the older ones. Several of the younger men only became parents shortly before or during their homelessness, and thus have little or no experience of unburdened and settled parenting. [12]

For the homeless men, the relationship with their children is often characterized by insecurity and heavy pressure on parental practices. This is partly due to the circumstances of their relationship – past and present – and the unfamiliar nature of their meetings, which take place at new locations or at unusual times. It is also partly due to the fact that the men's efforts at presenting themselves as good examples to their children is not only attributable to their own motivation to stabilise the relationship, but can also be traced back to expectations or situations of control generated by the children's mothers or by social workers in the shelter, for example. In this challenging situation, the desire to intensify the relationship with their children is often also related to having to offer the children something special within the limited time available. Accounts of the men and social workers interviewed indicate that the conflicting tension between high motivation and fear of failure can quickly turn into frustration. These frustrations, in turn, result in tendencies to retreat that are linked with damaged self-esteem – for example, where specific plans do not succeed or cannot be achieved. [13]

In trying to re-establish or stabilise the parent-child-contact while homeless, the quality of the relationship with the former partner or the mother of the children seems to be of importance. The interviewed men outline that it was particularly through the consent of the former partner that contact with the children was made possible and that relationships could be stabilised while homeless. In the case of a fragile relationship with the mother, the parent-child-relationship was more strongly impaired. Where this was the case, fathers were more aware of their dependence on the will of the mother, and formalised contact and visit regulations tended to lose significance. In particular, when considering the youth welfare

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[11] In: IU1; IU6; IS6; IU3; IS3; IU8.

[12] In, for example: IU1; IU2; IU6; IU7; IU3; IU5.

[13] In, for example: IS1; IU6; IS6; IU7; GD2; IS3; CI8.

authority or court, fathers view their own position as weak. The social workers interviewed also stressed that where relationships between the former partners are functional after the separation, this may promote the stabilization of the father-child-relationship within homelessness. [14] If the relationship between the parents does not remain functional – for instance where there is emotional hurt – the father often reacts by retreating. When it comes to their children, on the other hand, this fear of conflict combined with the great pressure to succeed can in some cases lead to a dichotomization of parental practices, exemplified in situations where men perceive themselves and act as a 'good friend' or leisure partner for their children while transferring other parental tasks to the mothers. [15]

The younger homeless men in the study are unsure about their ideas of parenting and are searching for role models for successful parenting. This can emerge either in a desire to acquire more knowledge related to parental practices or in a lack of positive perceptions about parenting, which can be attributed, for example, to negative experiences in their own childhood or an incomplete adolescence. For the older participants, in contrast, the perception of parenting seems to be completely formed and the related competences are understood as self-evident, or at least as already learned. Yet, there is a somewhat ambivalent connection between their position as competent fathers and as men, and they commonly uncertainty to take support – something that William Marsiglio and Joseph Pleck (2005) also found. [16]

In situations of divorce and separation, it becomes evident that there are similarities between homeless men and those who live in independent living conditions. This mostly relates to the impact of father-mother relationships on father-child relationships, the correlation between financial resources and the frequency of contact between fathers and children (for an overview see Tazi-Preve *et al.*, 2007). However, the consequences of homelessness seem clearly to aggravate the parenting situation for men – for example the material poverty, the institutional accommodation, the complex stigmatisation processes, individual crises and upbringing settings, which are controlled on several levels.

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[14] In, for example: IU1; IS2; CI2; IU6; IS6; IS7; IU3; IU4; IS5; GD1; GD2.

[15] In: CI1; CI6; IS3; IU4; IU8.

[16] In: IU6; IU2; IU3; IU4; CI4; IU5.

Destabilisation and New Formations of Parental Functions

At the beginning, we briefly sketched the parental functions of men preceding their homelessness and will now depict to what extent tasks and activities change after becoming homeless – both their practice and the men's perception of them. Below, we focus on the functions of leisure, upbringing, care function and financial provision. For the men in this study, the 'leisure function' presents itself as the dominant aspect of parental interaction with their children and consists mainly of excursions, a range of entertainment activities and spending time together in public parks and playgrounds. During these excursions the men try to play with their children, spend quality time with them, have fun together and in this way often reconnect through a formerly shared experience in which they felt quite safe and uncontrolled. Through the free time spent together and through re-connecting through shared experiences, situations repeatedly develop in which the fathers act caringly, express their emotional attachment and are able to signal that are still part of their children's lives and 'are there' for them as parents. These two functions – leisure and emotional care – play a central – and a comparatively greater role than before, in the relationship of the men with their children, despite the fact that these situations are also associated with challenges due to a lack of spatial and financial resources, and to the increased intensity. [17]

The 'upbringing function', here specifically related to dealing with children's resistance, 'setting boundaries' and parental discipline, is mostly avoided by the interviewees, even if it was part of the relationship with their children prior to their homelessness. This can be attributed, in particular, to fears about children reducing or even avoiding contact in response to being sanctioned by their father. At the same time, the rules and norms involved in the discipline are not necessarily set by the men, but rather are based upon the mothers' ideas and set by the institutional norms (i.e., house rules) of the respective shelter, which evokes a process of tactical and situational assessment within this area of tension. In this web of relationships and in light of limited time and rather unstable parent-child relationships, we can see that autonomous parental upbringing practices are severely limited by threats of discontinued contact, the danger of conflict with the former partner and the normative functions of the staff at the respective shelters. In reality, behavioural tasks are almost entirely assigned to the mothers. Most interviewees perceived this as a loss, even if some ambivalence was expressed about it. [18]

'Care functions', in the sense of such tasks as cooking, washing, ensuring physical hygiene, putting the children to bed and carrying out health checks, are rarely carried out by the men. Limited time and space and the lack of shared everyday

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[17] In, for example: IU1; IU2; IU6; IU3; IU4; IU8; CI7.

[18] In, for example: IU1; CI2; IU7; IU4; CI4; IU8.

activities mean that conditions are not ideal within homelessness for such activities. Given that the interviewed men did not take on these tasks prior to homelessness, this form of care work seems mostly unfamiliar to them and they expressed insecurities in this regard during the interviews. Only in terms of prospective independent housing with the possibility of more frequent or longer visits by their children do they stress their responsibility for such daily tasks. [19]

The 'financial provision function' mainly emerges in terms of paying child support for the interviewed men, on which they take diverse positions. Beyond fundamental agreement on wanting to provide the child support payments, we were able to make out three arguments for their problematization within homelessness. First, where relationships with former partners are tense and there are limited contact opportunities with the children, payments seem to be suspended. Secondly, although there is a reduced rate for homeless people, the payments represent a burden on their materially deprived situation. Thirdly, the men want to spend the money on the children themselves, to reconnect with their images of former financial provision. [20]

In summary, homelessness affects parental functions. While financial provision decreases because of acute poverty, the leisure function gains in significance. At the same time, the interviewees assign special significance to the relationship with their children because of their own insecurities, feelings of inferiority and damaged perceptions of identity, or due to their destabilized parent-child relationships and fear of losing their children. This usually leads to high motivation to construct, secure or further develop positive contact with their children – even if this is not always successful in their acutely stressful situations. The planning of leisure activities and emotional care for their children seem to be particularly important, both subjectively and in practice, while the behavioural-educational parenting is reduced and everyday care activities are hardly observed.

We assume that, in part, new concepts of fathering also emerge within the precarious situation of homelessness, as is argued by Schindler and Coley (2007). However, such concepts are not necessarily reflected as such or consciously integrated into what the men project as future parental practices. When asked about their prospects, many of the interviewed men formulated 'classic' images of nuclear families, full-time jobs and secure living situations, in which they feel responsible for the financial security of their children. Under the enormous pressure of homelessness and acute poverty, they aspire to recreate their social status and in this process connect with established perceptions of normality. This is done, for example, by once more assigning themselves the role of 'male breadwinner' and assigning to the women the 'caring' part of family responsibility. This holds true for

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[19] In: IU1; IU6; IU3; IU4; IU5; IU8.

[20] In: IU1; IS1; CI1; CI2; IS3; IU4; IS4; IS6; IU8; IS8.

young men as well, who also connect with influential hegemonic images of the father as the family breadwinner and convey images of normal housing, normal family and normal employment when asked about their prospects.[21] Based on these general interconnections between constructs of masculinity and fatherhood, in which employment and the adoption of financial responsibility for the children constitute a central and identity-establishing feature within male biographies, the enduring establishment of other parental practices proves to be difficult.

The Housing Situation and Institutional Influences on Parental Practices

Accommodation at homeless support services is limited in terms of time and, aside from personal support requirements, associated with an extensive administration of everyday life for the service users, which impedes contact with their children. The shelters included in this research can generally be characterised as cramped, even if the almost exclusively single bedrooms are characterised as important private spaces for retreat. There are some kitchen and sanitary facilities in the rooms though these are more generally incorporated into shared apartment structures or available for communal use on each floor. In addition, common rooms are important alternative spaces to spend time in. In transitional shelters, where residents do not have a key to the main door, admittance is supervised by staff at a reception desk and is limited to the opening hours – for example, until 12 midnight. Between 28 and 73 people live at the transitional shelters in this research: some for men only, and some for both men and women. How much contact there is between residents depends on the institution.

The men interviewed describe living at the shelters with ambivalence. As parents, the desire to organise visits and sleepovers by their children is strong, but accomplishing this depends on spatial conditions and the institutional visitor regulations, which determine if, and in what way, contact with the children can take place. This is possible to varying degrees depending on the shelter, while consultations with social workers or shelter management are a prerequisite. In some shelters, visits are permitted during the day; in other shelters, additional, overnight visits by children are possible once or twice a week. If social workers have concerns about the children being neglected at the shelter, visits can be forbidden. They are usually permitted in private rooms as well as in commonly accessible rooms, but are sometimes limited to specific spaces within the shelter, such as common rooms.[22]

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21 In, for example: IU1; IS1; IU2; IU3; IS3; IU5.

22 In, for example: IU1; IU6; IS4; GD1; GD2.

The fathers in this study are ambivalent about bringing their children to the transi-
tional shelters. On the one hand, the shelter is a resource that saves the fathers
from having to depend on other people's private rooms – such as the children's
mothers, or relatives or acquaintances of the men – or on public spaces; it allows
them to avoid the obligation of consumption, and it offers independence in terms
of weather conditions and a shared space for retreat. However, visitor contact is
perceived as difficult at the shelter. This often results in problematization of the
location and its residents, and the perception of the shelter as a stigmatised space.
The fathers interviewed substantiate this by explaining that their homeless living
conditions and all its associated problems become visible, that it is unreasonable
for children to witness this, and that contact between their children and co-residents
must be avoided. [23]

Visits to the shelter are described as challenging by the fathers due to the spatial
conditions. The children usually cannot move around freely, and sometimes
permanent supervision by the fathers constitutes a prerequisite for the visit. The
rooms that can be used are restricted and there are few possibilities to arrange
them to suit the children's needs. Outside the rooms there is little or no space
designed according to the needs of children. The residents usually try to arrange
the conditions as best they can, they demand consideration from their co-residents
and they make requests of the social workers. They fear that the children's visits
could be judged negatively by other people – including the mothers of the children,
social workers or the youth welfare authority – and that contact could be threatened
as a result. [24]

There is broad agreement between the men and social workers interviewed about
the limited space and the lack of child-friendly common rooms in the transitional
shelters for the homeless, which they describe as non-child-friendly. Depending on
the perspective in question, dissatisfaction can also extend to residents, or rather
service users, and their behaviour, although when asked to give specific examples,
none were given. This is how images of a stigmatised space of deviation emerge
(Foucault, 2006 [1967]); these are juxtaposed with standards on adequate space to
raise children, and demands for cleanliness, calm or empathetic communication
and a drug-free space result. While the views of the men interviewed about co-resi-
dents can in part be traced back to previously mentioned stigmatization, differen-
tiation or fears about the loss of status, the social workers interviewed substantiate
the problematization via the risk of unforeseeable events or the important aim of
protecting the child, among others. In this ambivalent position of wanting to facili-
tate parenting for the men within the shelters and, on the other hand, feeling

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[23] In, for example: IS1; IS1; IU8; IS6; IU3; IS7.

[24] In, for example: CI6; IU1; IU6; IU1; IU8; CI7.

responsible for the children's welfare within their professional context, a foreshadowing mode of control seems to manifest itself. It is possible that this impedes autonomous parental practices or contact between the men and the children. [25]

In summary, the transitional shelters represent the possibility of facilitating encounters with children and stabilizing the parent-child-relationship. At the same time, within the institution there is a degree of ambivalence and insecurity about such contact, in part because the space is not conceptualized for the temporary co-residence of children. Simultaneously, parenting in transitional housing within the homeless support services takes place in a very specific order dictated by social relationships, institutional norms or hierarchical relations of control, and it is evident that there are restrictions on the privacy of parent-child relationships and parental practices.

Social Work with Homeless Men and Fathers

In the transitional shelters in this research, a variety of support services are put in place for the service users. These range from social work counselling to consultations with general practitioners, psychiatrists and psychologists, from offers of leisure or occupational activities to daily routines. The specific social work support is usually made use of between once a week and once a month, depending on the needs of the individual and the conceptual conditions of the shelter.

There are social work support programmes on a wide range of topics. However, all shelters focus on securing an independent livelihood, albeit to varying degrees, and there is a particular focus on such activities as securing income, debt regulation and applying for financial claims with a view to developing the material conditions for independent housing. [26] In dealing with these topics, social workers try to remain objective in order to provide or facilitate support. However, because of diverse legal, social security and political labour market norms, as well as institutional regulations, the asymmetrical support relation is penetrated by normative and sanctioning elements, in terms of power. In this area of tension, having to switch between legal, assessing or administrative activities and an open, conversational, need-oriented, psychosocial counselling context, the situation proves to be particularly challenging for the social workers, as well as for the residents. [27]

Addressing parenting within the counselling contexts reflects this clearly, where parenting is mentioned during the initial registration conversations, but is usually

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[25] In, for example: IS6; GD1; IU3; IS4; GD2.

[26] In, for example: IS1; IS3; IS4; IS5; IS7.

[27] In: GD2; IU3.

only related to financial responsibilities or debt due to child support payments. Dealing with family circumstances is reduced to underage or dependent children, and not identified in its psychosocial dimension of a possible support requirement for the fathers, or as a social work target. The basic focus on securing an independent livelihood with a simultaneous subordination, or rather, neglect of a psychosocial emphasis are critically reflected by the social workers from a professional standpoint, even if they see themselves as being confronted with a lack of resources within the homeless support services, as well as with the governmental authorities setting priorities of housing and securing a livelihood. [28]

Against this backdrop, social workers explain that parenting is not dealt with much for men within the homeless support services. In transitional shelters with both genders, the social workers interviewed self-critically reflected on the fact that the parenting of mothers is given more attention. From a professional point of view, this is partly explained through a needs-focused orientation, or the voluntary addressing of psychosocial problems. These topics are thus only dealt with when social workers recognise the need and willingness for it in their counterpart, or if the men actively broach the topic themselves. When resources in terms of time and a viable relationship permit, psychosocial aspects become part of the support relationship. In particular, many social workers see their support with regard to addiction problems as significant, and their professional competences as relevant. [29] Parenting, on the other hand, is hardly focused on, as little care demand is signalized and responsibility beyond child support payments is largely pushed into the realm of private responsibility. This can, in part, be attributed to knowledge gaps and insecurities about the technicalities of family, raising children and parenting. [30]

The interviewed men also explained that beyond the issue of child support payments, parenting is scarcely dealt within counselling sessions. The men themselves also push the topic of securing an independent livelihood into the centre of the support relationship and try not to mention psychosocial topics, or to do so as little as possible. In their aspiration for normalcy, the residents perceive support from the social workers as a possibility for attaining independent housing prospects. Thus, they share the focus on material security conveyed to them by the social workers. This emphasis is strengthened in as far as public housing approval is written by the responsible social worker, who thus shares a lot of the responsibility

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[28] In, for example: IS1; IS3; IS2; IS7; GD2.

[29] In: IS1; IS4; IS7; GD2.

[30] In: IS6; IS5; GD2; GD1.

for the attainment of independent housing with the service users. In this strategic support context, the interviewed men try to present themselves in the best light for the social workers, and avoid mentioning psychosocial struggles. [31]

During the interviews for this research, on the other hand, the men talked about crisis situations, hardship, their need for parenting support, and unstable relationships with children or their mothers quite openly. For the most part, they do not see support opportunities within social work, as mentioned above, and in many cases, it is explicitly out of the question for them. This is because parenting is seen as 'private', or it is stressed that, in principle, consultations with social workers are appropriate, but that they do not currently have a need for them. When formulating the explicit wish for specific information, practical advice or concrete support, social work is considered inappropriate. Reasons given in this regard include, for example, the suspicion that the social workers are not competent, that psychological or psycho-therapeutic support contexts are more helpful, or that private relationships are more personal or are separate from the strategic context. [32] From the perspective of the interviewed men, where social workers facilitated the children's sleepovers at the shelter of provided information about free leisure activities, this was experienced as helpful to their parenting. [33]

In summary, the support relationship between social workers and fathers as service users in homeless support services is categorised by a broad failure to address parenting due to complex interrelations. The men's need for support, which we believe to be quite apparent, is not dealt with; rather, it is largely pushed into the private sphere, and thus often remains unresolved. In the strategic support context, the professional tendencies of social workers to take an open, holistic or multi-perspective approach with service users seems to be reaching its limits. While the professional-normative demands are, indeed, partly formulated in psychosocial questions in this area of conflict, their responsibility is placed on other actors, such as psychotherapists, psychologists or internal residence housing care workers.

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[31] In, for example: IU4; IS3; IU3; IU5; IS6; IU8; IU6.

[32] In: IU6; IU8; IU4; IU3.

[33] In: CI2; IU8.

Outlook

The experiences of homelessness and acute poverty represent a decisive biographical rupture for those affected, as well as an enormous psychological burden, in which they are confronted with unemployment, debt, health problems or fragile social relationships. The experience is categorised by the loss of social recognition, a perception of social decline and deep feelings of failure. With the simultaneous loss of their position within the family and in parental functions, those affected can no longer relate to their personal and usually hegemonic images of masculinity or fatherhood.

We have argued that men's parental functions change with homelessness. In this respect, we assume that concepts of fathering are destabilized in the precarious situation of homelessness. Similarly to what Schindler and Coley (2007) have argued in terms of homeless fathers who are accommodated with their children, we see how new tasks and activities can emerge here. However, changed practices are hardly noticed or rationalized by the men, and in terms of prospects, they often want to reconnect with their former positions and practices.

The prospect of living independently is a significant motivation for personal lifestyle changes, as well as a central condition for the restoration of continuity in their everyday relationships with their children. Related socio-political demands for the speedy provision of affordable and adequate living spaces – regardless of whether there is a social work support requirement – can constitute a major foundation for stabilizing parent-child systems (see Bui and Graham, 2006; McArthur *et al.*, 2006; Barker *et al.*, 2011).

If temporarily destabilized hegemonic representations of parenting should be treated from a gender-critical normative perspective, in order to, for example, open up dichotomized gender arrangements, or to support men in connecting them to market mediated employment and care work more strongly, then intensive psycho-social and gender reflective support is necessary.

The relationships of support between social workers and fathers are marked by a mutual dynamic of not addressing family burdens, as the establishment of a secure livelihood is the priority of the social work. This results in an inability to really relate to their crisis, or gain deeper insight into their problematic situations (Duttweiler, 2007); as such, social workers are unlikely to notice signs that parenting support is needed.

Our findings suggest a need for support for this specific target group, as the motivations and efforts in relation to parenting are often associated with the stigma of homelessness. This highlights how low self- esteem can influence the practice and

construction of parenting. Thus, we argue for a stronger social work emphasis on psychosocial aspects within the area of the homeless support services, which also focuses on the psychological and identity crises of parenting.

As regards changed and often fragile parent-child relationships, as well as multi-layered insecurities, the research shows, first, a specific need for support in terms of parental education. This would facilitate discussion about child development, challenges in single-parent relationships or ambivalence in relation to hegemonic norms of masculinity and fatherhood, as well as the development of a successful and self-esteem fostering conduct (see also Bui and Graham, 2006; Schindler and Coley, 2007; Barker *et al.*, 2011). Secondly, we believe that supportive or autono-mously organized group work activities for parents in homeless support services are important to foster communal educational processes of reflection or involve-ment in care activities (Arhant *et al.*, 2013). In relation to family crises, the men described burdensome, but quite common relationship conflicts and separations. Taking into account that the quality of the relationship between the parents is a crucial factor in the re-establishment of parent-child relationships and successful parenting, we are of the view, thirdly, there is a need for measures geared towards dealing with separation and changed or alternative family structures and their dynamics.

Index

IU1   Interview User 1
IS1   Interview Social Worker 1
CI1   Counselling Interview 1
IU2   Interview User 2
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CI2   Counselling Interview 2
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GD2   Group Discussion 2

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