

Grandfathers For Rent – If Aging Men Care¹

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Abstract:

Men over 50 years of age who perform care work outside the biological family, e.g. in “grandfathers for rent” programs, are rare, as are research projects dealing with this phenomenon. Recently, however, grandfathers for rent have attracted the attention of politics and media as a *potential* solution to overcome societal challenges, such as the care crisis, and the effects of demographic changes. What motivates aging men to become a grandfather for rent and how is the care practice experienced? With our study we strived to answer these and other questions, all the while retaining a focus on the social implications of this phenomenon. The theoretical framework for the study is found in the intersection of (hegemonic) masculinity, care and age which relies on grandfather studies, the debate on caring masculinities, on the care crisis, and the social-political concept of *active aging*. In keeping with the *win-win* credo of the discourse, senior citizens are thus encouraged to modify their lifestyle and activities in order to provide social benefits for others as well as for themselves, supposedly enriching their own aging process.

The empirical study was conducted in a German federal state. In terms of the motivations of grandfathers for rent, it becomes apparent that they are aware of the current care crisis. A second motive, however, is a feeling of missed opportunities during their previous life course as career-

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focused breadwinners. Grandfatherhood for rent is perceived as a *second chance* of active participation in childcare. Although their care practice is similar to that of biological grandparenthood, the interviewees do not relinquish individual claims on their available time. Furthermore, and somewhat contrary to the promise of active aging, it becomes apparent that the care work is far from effortless – and can make you both *young* and *old* at the same time. Patterns of traditional division of labor among gender groups are persistent within their care practice, as can be seen in grandfathers preferably taking on typically *male* care activities - often outdoor. Nevertheless, the care work provided by grandfathers for rent does help articulate emotionality and affection and therefore gives hints to reconciliation of masculinity and care.

Keywords: Rent a grandfather, active aging, care crisis, hegemonic masculinity, caring masculinities

Kiralık büyükbabalar-Yaşlanan erkekler bakıcı olursa

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Özet:

Biyolojik aileleri dışında bakım işi yapan 50 yaşın üzerindeki erkekler, örneğin “kiralık büyükbabalar” programları, aynı bu konuyla ilgili araştırma projeleri gibi, enderdir. Ancak yakın zamanda, kiralık büyükbabalar, bakım krizi ve demografik değişikliklerin etkisi gibi toplumsal problemlerin üstesinden gelmek için *potansiyel* bir çözüm olarak, politikanın ve medyanın dikkatini çekti. Yaşlanan erkekleri “kiralık büyükbaba” olmaya iten nedir ve bu bakım pratiği nasıl deneyimlenir? Çalışmamızda, bu konunun toplumsal implikasyonlarına odaklanarak, bu ve benzeri sorulara cevap aradık. Bu çalışmanın teorik çerçevesi, (hegemonik) erkeklik, bakım ve büyükbabalık çalışmalarına konu olan yaş unsuru ile yaşlanan erkekler üzerine yürütülen tartışmaların, bakım krizinin ve sosyo-politik bir kavram olan *aktif yaşlanmanın* kesişimi ile oluşmuştur. Söyleme yerleşik olan “kaybedenin olmadığı” inancıyla uyumlu olarak, yaşça büyük vatandaşlar, kendileri ve diğerlerine sosyal fayda sağlamak için, bilhassa kendi yaşlanma süreçlerini zenginleştirmek adına, hayat tarzlarını ve aktivitelerini değiştirmeleri için cesaretlendirilmektedir.

Ampirik çalışma bir Almanya federal eyaletinde gerçekleştirilmiştir. Kiralık büyükbabaların motivasyonunda görünür olan, mevcut bakım krizinin farkında olmalarıdır. İkinci bir motivasyon ise, kendi geçmişlerinde, kariyer odaklı geçim

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sağlayıcılar olarak, bazı fırsatları kaçırmış oldukları hissidir. Kiralık büyükbabalık, çocuk bakımına aktif katılım için *ikinci bir şans* olarak görülmektedir. Bakım pratikleri biyolojik büyükbabalık ile benzer olduğu halde, görüşmeciler müsait zamanları konusunda bireysel haklarından feragat etmemektedir. Dahası, görülüyor ki, bakım işi, aktif yaşlanmanın vaatlerine ters düşecek şekilde, zahmetsiz olmaktan uzaktır ve kişiyi aynı anda hem *genç* hem de *yaşlı* yapabilir. Büyükbabaların çoğunlukla dışarıda yürütülen, tipik olarak *erkek* bakım aktivitelerini tercih etmeleri de gösterir ki toplumsal cinsiyete dayalı geleneksel işbölümü kalıpları bakım pratiğinde de süreklilik göstermektedir. Yine de, büyükbabalar tarafından üstlenilen bakım işi, duygusallığın ve şefkatin ifade edilmesine yardımcıdır ve bu nedenle de erkeklik ve bakımın uzlaşması üzerine ipuçları sağlamaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Kiralık büyükbaba, aktif yaşlanma, bakım krizi, hegemonik erkeklik, bakıcı erkeklikler

Introduction

“Grandfather for rent” is a relatively recent social phenomenon made prominent in Germany primarily through a television series in the 1980s (“Der Leihopa”), which may have been inspired by a real institution: the “Grandmother and Grandfather Care Service Bremen” (Oma-Opa-Hilfsdienst Bremen), that was founded in 1983 and exists to this day (Klein, 2014, p. 20). Back then, grandparents for rent services were a curiosity in care, but today numerous organizations are offering their assistance with finding grandfathers and grandmothers for rent, or with becoming a grandfather or grandmother for rent yourself, indicating a growing demand of families for assistance in reconciling work and family (IfD Allensbach, 2012, p. 37). In Germany, such programs include volunteer initiatives (Klein 2014, p. 20), publicly funded child care institutions as well as market driven organizations¹ (Riedel, 2007) with a clear dominance of women taking the role of a grandmother for rent as our results show. A finding that came as no surprise if we take a look at the feminine connotation of non-professional (Beckmann, 2016, p. 33) as well as (semi-)professional fields of care provision in Germany (Funder, 2017, p. 455).

Overlooking the already existing body of research we know that we know little. Neither German nor international agencies provide data on the distribution and characteristics of these old male caregivers as well as insights on the social practice of providing care (Lattner and Schneewind 2014; Klein 2014).

We define grandfathers for rent as a social practice by which men over 50 years of age care for children they have no kin relationship to (Lattner and Schneewind, 2014, p. 14). Their participation enters them into an asymmetrical subject-subject-(service) relationship (Mädorin, 2010, p. 88) between an older *care giver* and a younger *care taker*.

In our project that was located in the German federal state of Hesse, we were interested in the quantitative dimension of grandfathers

for rent, their motivation, their care practices and whether and how they *modernize* (hegemonic) masculinity (Meuser, 2010, p. 325): Do they adhere to the image of the loving (Lattner and Schneewind, 2014, p. 9) but nevertheless *distant* grandfather (Tarrant 2012), or do they challenge this depiction that has been perpetuated – also by academics (Mann 2007, p. 286) – for a long time?

Grandfathers for rent are conceptually located within the debates of the interrelations between (hegemonic) masculinity, care and age as it is discussed within grandfather studies and the concept of caring masculinities.² We further argue that these intersections can be better understood if the care relations are contextualized within a political paradigm shift regarding age policies as well as the feminist diagnosis of a care crisis.

We will start off by discussing the current research on grandfathers for rent, introduce our theoretical approach, give a short overview on our quantitative findings, present the results of the interviews and discuss them in the subsequent conclusion.

1. Theoretical framework to study grandfathers for rent

1.1 Current research on grandfathers for rent - untapped water

German research discusses the phenomenon of grandfathers for rent in connection with processes of modernization of the family and demographic change (Höpflinger, Hummel and Hugentobler, 2006). Grandfathers for rent are considered to be assets within these macro tendencies (Possinger, 2014). But despite the assumption that they might be of growing significance (Höpflinger et al., 2006, p. 105) these studies are devoid of any insights into the experiences of these old care givers. There is only one other study available for the German case: a “feasibility study” (Lattner and Schneewind, 2014) that explored potential grandfathers for rent. The study does not provide any gender sensitive insight, nor significant statistical data. One might argue that

they share some similarities with so called “foster grandfathers” in the United States whose care tasks are centered on help regarding institutionalized education and vocation schemes. The state-funded volunteering program “Foster Grandparents” is a socio-political program to incentivize volunteering of older people in general and of older people from lower social strata (Tan et al., 2016, p. 88). Predominantly, studies investigating this phenomenon look at socio-demographic characteristics, participation duration and frequency, matters of social cohesion as well as issues of physical and psychological health development of the participants (Rook and Sorkin, 2003; Tan et al., 2016).

Summarizing, we lack quantitative data on grandfathers for rent as well as insights into why men participate in such programs and how they experience the care relationship. To further investigate these issues we developed a complex theoretical framework.

1.2 Reclaiming or transgressing hegemonic masculinity?

International research on grandfathers for rent can be related to the more general discourse on grandparenthood (Höpflinger et al., 2006; May, Mason and Clarke, 2012; Marhánková, 2015), the Anglophone grandfather studies (Mann 2007, Tarrant 2012, Mann, Tarrant and Leeson, 2016) and the current debates gravitating around caring masculinities (Elliot, 2016; for an overview: Hunter, Riggs and Augustinos, 2017; Ruby and Scholz, 2018).

Grandparent studies raise questions of grandparental care practices in general, whereas grandfather studies provide insights into the interrelations between masculinity, age(ing), and care. The latter criticizes grandparenthood research claiming that grandfathers are often merely made into *decals* of grandmothers. Many studies never actually give a voice to grandfathers and make assumptions about them based on the insights on grandmothers (Tarrant, 2012, p. 184). This nurtured the depiction of grandfathers as being more *distant* and less *engaged* than grandmothers, with their caring style being formal and authoritarian

(Mann, 2007). Grandfather studies take up this gender bias, acknowledging the gender specifics and the contributions of grandfathers to care work (Tarrant, 2012).

Theoretically, grandfather studies center around the notion of *hegemonic masculinity* (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). It introduced a historical and dynamic system of subordination between different forms of masculinity, who complicit, diverge or contest the “hegemonic” cultural notion of what it means to be a man in and through a specific set of social practices, and the subordination of women and femininity. With a critical impetus, they argue that age(ing) (Hearn and Sandberg, 2009), care practices (Elliot, 2016) and the interrelation of masculinity, care and age(ing) are not investigated systematically (Mann et al., 2016).

What remains ambiguous in grandfather studies, however, is whether and how grandfathers connect to hegemonic masculinity. Men who are retired and provide care might be considered diverging from hegemonic masculine identities. They are no longer the breadwinner and the head of the household which entails the exclusion from activities within the reproductive sphere (Ruby and Scholz, 2018). As they retire they become disconnected from their work environment and re-enter their homes (Tarrant, 2013). This “transition to retirement ...generates a gap between the idea and the reality of hegemonic masculinity” (Mann et al., 2016, p. 4). Furthermore, cultural assumptions and expectations portray care and masculinity as contentious (Jackson, 2016, p. 105). Retired grandfathers are confronted with the challenge to renegotiate their relation to *traditional* masculinity (Mann, 2007). And they do so in various ways, as grandfather studies suggest. They are able to diverge from traditional male roles, thus expressing an alternative mode of masculinity in their relationship to their grandchildren that is based on a desire to be more affectionate (Waldrop et al., 1999). It is argued that grandfatherhood could even counter hegemonic masculinity, as grandfathers can be reflexive and draw consequences for the enactment of their current role by using their fatherhood, which they experienced as impartial and distant, as a non-desirable negative counter horizon

(Sorensen and Cooper, 2010). Others understand grandfatherhood as a way to *soften* and *reconnect* to hegemonic masculinity. It provides men with “(hegemonic) capital” by demonstrating “to be fit and active; to be needed and significant family figures” (Mann et al., 2016, p. 597) while adhering to a more nurturing grandfather image (ibid, 2016).

Despite these ambiguities, grandfather studies until now lack an alternative conceptualization of masculinity. Thus it might be interesting to take a closer look at the notion of the term *caring masculinities* which arose in the field of “involved fatherhood” (Hunter et al., 2017), oscillating between science and politics (Gärtner et al. 2007; Ruby and Scholz, 2018). Recently, Elliot introduced a stronger theorization of the concept. She argues that *caring masculinities* “embraces values of care such as positive emotion, interdependence, and relationality” (Elliot, 2016, p. 240). According to her, being a man and caring are not mutually exclusive. Elliot differs *caring for* (*doing care*) and *caring about* (being affectionate and emotional). She argues that by doing care men might also learn to care about and that caring masculinities can be seen as a “gender equality intervention” (ibid., 2016, p. 243).

This positive, rather enthusiastic claim that does not subsume the occurrence of more nurturing enactments of male caregiving under a hegemonic roof, bears its own problems as the interrelations between hegemonic masculinity and caring masculinities are complex: There is considerable doubt that hegemonic expectations are losing importance in men’s lives as practices of caring masculinities expand. Researchers claim that aspects of caring masculinities are incorporated into hegemonic norms and expectations; some even argue that caring masculinities become hegemonic itself (Hunter et al., 2017).

Those insights leave us with the clear cue regarding analysis and interpretation of our data: Affectionate articulations by grandfathers for rent can be considered hegemonic, but do not have to. So, it might be helpful to consider the “feminine other” as well, whose disregard is a central pillar of hegemonic masculinity, and therefore take a closer look

at shifting or reestablished gender differences in care work (Hunter et al. 2017, p. 7).

1.3 Care crises and renegotiation of age

Despite the important insights provided by the debates mentioned above, they do not reflect upon the societal implications regarding age(ing) and care practices, systematically. Grandfather studies operate with a distinction between “young” and “old” men, the latter being retired, predominantly. Caring masculinities studies are devoid of any reflections upon age(ing). Grandfather studies widely ignore that elders nowadays are confronted with politically, scientifically and medically driven expectations of active aging (van Dyk, 2015). Studies gravitating around the concept of caring masculinities on the other hand miss out to investigate that age(ing) might intersect with masculinity and care. Moreover, both strands of thinking do not consider that the societal conditions of care are crisis-prone. We therefore argue that grandfathers for rent can be contextualized by two interrelating macro-phenomena: the *care crisis* (Fraser, 2016) and the welfare state concept of *active aging* (Walker, 2002)ⁱⁱ.

Increasing employment rates of women as well as changing gender roles and family concepts imply that reproductive work and the care tasks associated with them can no longer be comprehensively provided by (employed) women alone. One strategy for German middle-class families to overcome this care crisis is the delegation of reproductive tasks, such as shifting care work to migrant workers and women from lower social strata (Hochschild, 2003; Anderson, 2007). Thus, women participating in the labor market externalize reproductive activities, causing an entanglement of various dimensions of social inequality (Apitzsch and Schmidbaur, 2010). Family policy and legislation addresses the care crisis as well (Blome, 2017, p. 206). The German government, for example, has greatly improved both public childcare structures and legal entitlements to care, including support for bringing formerly privatized, self-employed childcare workers into

public child care structures (Winker, 2015, p. 33). In addition, age policy aims at strengthening the role of “regular” grandparents in child care (BMFSFJ, 2012, p. 130; for Great Britain: May et al., 2012, p. 153). Grandparents for rent are considered to tackle the problems of reconciling employment and family (Deutscher Bundestag, 2012).

The acknowledgment of grandfathers for rent as a strategy to address a crisis-prone social reproduction is accompanied with changes in welfare-state politics aimed at activating untapped potentials, such as those of senior citizens, in order to close “care supply gaps” (Auth, 2009, p. 311) within families and which, as the German government continues to argue, will be an intergenerational “win-win situation” (Deutscher Bundestag 2012, p. 14): Senior citizens can engage in active, useful and meaningful practices that provide them with social and health benefits. Parents, in turn, receive assistance in their efforts to manage both career and family (ibid.). Such a political rhetoric can be considered as part of a general *renegotiating of age* (van Dyk, 2015). In the wake of a neoliberal-conservative turn, a structural reduction in public services coincides with the sociocultural formation of *entrepreneurial subjects* (Bröckling, 2007) who “should want to” (van Dyk, 2015, p. 104) actively apply themselves towards the public good – for their own benefit and that of others. Considering the catastrophist demographic discourse, aging individuals are becoming of interest – especially when it comes to “young-old” (ibid.). Volunteering and the individualization of health responsibilities (Schroeter, 2009, p. 166) – regardless of one’s ability to succeed there (cf. Estes, Biggs, Phillipson, 2003, p. 197) – are cornerstones of this renegotiation, as the underlying expectations are considered to be a moral necessity for an active “social” being (van Dyk, 2015, p. 99). Carried by a “societal consensus” (van Dyk and Lessenich, 2009, p. 36), this age policy presents itself as a win-win situation as both young and old people, which will profit because it is considered to strengthen the overall quality of life, communal solidarity and participation opportunities (Walker, 2002).

The discursive renegotiations of age bear gender specific implications for becoming and being a grandfather for rent. The “regime of voluntary self-control” (Bröckling, 2013, p. 214) of the activating welfare state (van Dyk, 2015, p. 104) in times of care crisis can be understood as a catalyst for transforming and reproducing habitualized gender practice and identity construction in later life (Auth, 2009, p. 304). By providing care for others in the name of the common good grandfathers for rent might demonstrate that they are still needed and fit; they can show their importance and ability even though they might be considered “old iron”. They can show that they are (old) men you can count on in times of crises.

2. The social practice of grandfather for rent

2.1 Grandparents for rent – a feminized social field

The statistical basis for the analysis was provided by the volunteer organizations which mediate supply and demand of care-provision by grandparents for rent with respect to the number of participants, age and gender, retirement status. We also included data provided by the Federal Statistical Office which is concerned with public childcare services which neither included the retirement status nor the marital status (HSL, 2015).

Of the 1,370 male and female grandparents for rent (50 years or older) identified in the German federal state of Hesse 5.9% (N=81) are *male* care givers. This percentage changes when we look in detail at specific fields of care provision: in public child daycare it is 3.3% (N=37 of a total of 1,134; HSL, 2015). For volunteering grandparents that percentage climbs all the way to 18.6% (N=44). Within the group of all grandfathers for rent 45.7% are part of public child daycare while 54.3% work as volunteers. 65.3% (N=49). All the males participating in grandparents for rent programs are 60 years or older. Inside the field of volunteering grandfathers for rent we can state that 86% are retired (N=43). 87, 8% of the volunteering care givers are married or live in a

partnership. 2.4% of these men are either divorced (N=1) or single (N=1). 7.3% of them are widowed.

The social phenomenon of grandparents for rent therefore shows a clear gender bias. This makes it even more interesting to investigate why men participate in such a *feminized* field. The goals of our problem-centered interviews (Witzel, 2000) were to investigate individual paths of becoming a grandfather for rent, the motivation and practice of care relations.

2.2 Socio-demographic characteristics of the interviewees and qualitative approach

A total of 16 interviews were conducted, three of which were with grandmothers for rent. Three of the male interviewees were publicly funded, with the rest being volunteers. Another three of the interviewees were males within public child daycare. Ten males are volunteer grandfathers. Regarding the subsequent presentation of our results, we will focus on the latter group. Almost all interviewed grandfathers for rent live with a partner or a spouse (9 out of 10), four of them being married. Five interviewees got divorced and re-partnered. All of the male interviewees are retired. The sample also contains men with at least one kin-related grandchild (6 out of 10). Their average age is 75.1 (ranging from 63 to 80). Five grandfathers for rent have an academic degree. Considering the median household income of 3.300€ per month (based on those interviewees who provided such information; N= 7) they are part of the middle class (see for Germany: Niehues, 2017).

The data have been analyzed according to the *qualitative content analysis* (Mayring, 2015) which allowed us to summarize a large body of empirical data by inductively and deductively condensing recurring topics into categories across several cases.

2.3 Motives for becoming a grandfather for rent

Having time/giving time

One motive is derived from families' need for support which can be called *having time, giving time*. This need is twofold: on the one hand, due to occupational obligations parents are under time constraints, and on the other, there is a lack of family members, relatives, or friends that could or would support them with child care. Having time, however, is one of the hallmark potentials of retirement, which can be used to help others:

The parents just don't have any time, but time is something we grandparents have in spades. That was just something where we, where I thought, you know, I might as well give some of my time both to the parents and the grandchildren.
(Mr. Weiß³, lines 31-34)

One's own experience of lacking support

Motivation seems not merely centered around the needs of other families, but also cognizant of the "helplessness" experienced during one's own family history. The participants appear very well aware of what it means to be able to count on a network of family assistance:

And another thing was that we had been in that situation ourselves ... His parents are in South America, both in [part of the country]. When things got tough, my parents came, but that was always really difficult for them ... I just stayed at home, that was normal back then. ... [B]ut when I wasn't available, that's when my parents came. And that kind, that sort of situation, here in [town in Hesse] it was about 22 families that were the same! Well, I suppose we managed to squeeze in some time that way. (Mrs. Perez, lines 11-19).

Sense of regret

The third central motive is a type of regret affecting primarily men who led a gendered, career-focused life (Russel 1986, see also Sorensen and Cooper, 2010). A majority of the retired men in our sample led such a

career-focused life pre-retirement. So, they were mostly “absent” as a father.

And now with little [name of grandchild] here, I really wish I had done that back then with our own ... But it wasn't possible ... [W]hen I think back to my working days, it is just this impossible thing. Couldn't do both together at 100%. (Mr. Perez, lines 323-328)

By providing care for the grandchildren for rent they experience a child's development joyfully which they missed as fathers with their “own” kids (and also grandkids):

You know one of the kids there, it is so exciting, I really find it incredibly exciting, and I'm also really thankful for it. That I can witness this one more time. Because I didn't experience all that with my own son and my grandson. (Mr. Wagner, lines 314-317)

And by being (mostly) absent they even got the impression that they have done something wrong regarding the education of their own children:

The daughter always comes and wants to change the tire with me, see. Now she finally wants to do it alone for a change. She's 33 and has never changed a tire. That in itself is a sign that I did something wrong there. (Mr. Gabriel, lines 756-758)

Our interpretation of the reflexive use of one's own fatherhood as “inadequate” implies a kind of debt that is now being repaid. Being a grandfather for rent provides an opportunity to make up for missed opportunities during (grand-) fatherhood.

Providing care now to receive care in the future

Two of the interviewed grandmothers – but none of the grandfathers – explained their participation partly with a *prospect* of future help from the care families, be that simply help with groceries, or emergency assistance such as transport to the hospital or not being alone at a critical life event.

They [the family of the child] would be there if I have to be at the hospital. They live down the road five minutes from here. That is one reason why I decided to help them. ... If something happens, they would take care. We would have not to call an ambulance. (Mrs. Perez, lines 385-393)

The assumption of reciprocity reflects a specific female experience of age(ing). Women tend to get older and correspondingly are more likely to be widowed or live alone (Backes, 2005).

2.4 The practice of grandfathers for rent

The role of spouses

As men prepare to take their commitments as grandfathers for rent, their spouses play an important role: Often it is those spouses who pointed their partners to the programs in the first place, e.g. through newspaper articles or their own experiences.

But it also works the other way round as the case of Mr. Müller indicates. As his wife transitioned into retirement she got a “pension shock” and he felt responsible or obligated (as a husband) to help her find a meaningful activity as an early retiree.

It was important for me that she had a task. For me personally it wouldn't really have been the right thing. I wouldn't have needed to take care of those two girls. And I was occupied anyway. But I wanted to support her. (Mr. Müller, lines 643-645).

In the majority of the cases wives/female partners are the ones who maintain and stabilize the relationship between the grandparents for rent and the parents of the children they care for.

Yes, well, with [father of the children] I did, he's a very quiet one, but when I have some trouble or problems with my health, then I call [mother of the children] and she helps me out. (Interviewer: And this goes the other way as well?) Yes, [name of the mother] as well, and especially with [name of grandchild1], when she has trouble there. (Mrs. Holland, lines 752-763)

The grandfathers are generally more reserved, and hold back:

Yeah, I don't really want to. I prefer dealing with the kids, see, rather than sitting down and talking about politics for hours. (Mr. Gabriel, lines 360-361)

Doing, being an ordinary family

Establishing a trusted and respectful relationship with the parents of the child(ren) cared for is of great importance to all interviewed grandfathers for rent. As our findings indicate these arrangements are considered to be “family-like” as things happening within these relations are things that are considered to be “normal” affairs of “normal” families. This is reflected in the response of our grandfathers for rent, who (largely) do not separate their own family from the *other* family:

Well, we also see the parents now and then, at concerts and such, or they invite us over, on Christmas or for some coffee or for a birthday. Yes, that is, it is kind of like a part of your own family. Yes, I wouldn't, I don't really see a difference there. (Mr. Kramer, lines 222-225)

At the same time, this “doing family” is corresponding with “caring about”: Grandfathers for rent report that they feel a strong affection for

the child(ren). As it seems, there is no qualitative difference between biological and social grandchildren:

And it is just such a joy, when the kids make those sparkling eyes and you see that everything is accepted somehow, and yeah, that was the same with my own grandkids. (Mr. Kramer, lines 69-71)

Regarding quantity and frequency of care arrangements there is nevertheless a strong orientation towards time sovereignty. As the care arrangements are usually regulated by appointments, though spontaneous “*calls*” (Mr. Gabriel, line 32) are not categorically excluded. One *fringe case* is Mr. Müller:

Yes, my wife always tells me the dates. And it does happen sometimes that I then say: 'Gee, so many in a row, think of what Ms. [name of the project organizer] told us, that this isn't supposed to just be a substitute for child care' ... The grandfathers and grandmothers in families don't do that either, do they, being together with the kids so much during the week, right? And that's how we do it with our own children and grandchildren, of course, and so we do it ... do it also with the family of [name of the grandchild in care]. (Mr. Müller, lines 831-837)

With regard to questions of educational aspects of the care relations it becomes apparent that some of the grandfathers for rent do not consider their primary task to educate the children, unless the parents explicitly ask that “the children should also be encouraged a little” (Mr. Müller, lines 1217-1218). But even without such an explicit desire of *not interfere* can transition to *interfere*. It is always clear, however, that the last word about the children lies with the parents:

But when it is about [name of the grandchild], I say: 'Listen, you gotta think about this again, okay?' But when they decide he's not

playing soccer anymore tomorrow, I can't undo that decision. (Mr. Wagner, lines 362-364)

Making you old and keeping you young

Overlooking the intersection of masculinity, age and care confronts us with a complex picture. At first, the care relation itself is experienced in a two-fold way as it keeps the grandfathers for rent *young* and makes them *old* at the same time. The latter is addressed by Mr. Perez on the occasion of picking up the child from kindergarten:

[H]e has his ... kick bike ... and he's off at a speed I can't keep up with ... I really have to make every effort ... you never know when the next car is coming. And that was the case, a car came, some Turkish guy with loud Turkish music, this young man he drives and he's blind to the world, he's just sitting there, speeding, and a kid is there, and then ... I ran like crazy ... I said to myself, man, I'm so old, I can't do this anymore ... I don't want to blame myself, I told myself, I should have paid more attention, if something happens to the kid. (Mr. Perez, lines 670-687).

As the quote indicates “doing care” corresponds with “doing age”, in this case “doing old”: It is constituted by not being physically capable of “protecting” the child from physical harm, because of the disparities between the physical capacities of a “young” and “fast” body and an old “slow” one, that might no longer be able to guarantee the physical safety of the child.

Interestingly, it can be observed that experiences of “feeling old” in and through care practice seem to come up especially with those grandfathers who have the least biographical experience with small children. The (age related) strains of care which might occur are related to a lack of care experience. Mrs. Perez articulates this connection when she talks of her husband's “fear” that the boy might run away from him,

which, in her view, is rooted in his absence as a father due to occupational obligations.

My husband is always afraid that he'll run away from him. He doesn't do that at all, he's not one to run away. No kid runs away. I mean, I've raised kids... He was always at work. He never really experienced all that. (Mrs. Perez, lines 251-253)

Nevertheless, health and medical issues cannot simply be ignored. Mr. Perez, for example, has “problems with the cervical spine ... and the asthma, that's also quite something.” (Mrs. Perez, lines 474-476)

On the other hand, the care practice is reputed to be a veritable “fountain of youth”.

Yes, when we do bicycle tours ... then sometimes we go off into rough terrain, cross-country, right? We always liked doing that, right, up a steep hill or across a flat ... and I can't do it like that anymore with my wife. But the kids, they give you ideas ... So you can see that the bike helped me stay young ... (Mr. Gabriel, lines 143-156)

Staying young goes hand in hand with specific learning processes. Some children, for example, introduce their grandfathers for rent to a current technology, or question their entrenched views and perceptions. But even things as simple as just bugger around can become sources for that *fountain of youth*.

Masculinity, care and age

Examining relationship between masculinity and care in old age, it should first be noted that a majority of interviewees feel love and affection while caring for the children.

There's nothing more fun for me than driving in my car with [name of grandchild], because the first thing, when he

sits down and buckles up, he says: 'You got something to eat?' Then he says: 'I just got one more question'. Then he says: 'Where does God actually live, anyway?' (Mr. Wagner, lines 79-83)

It also becomes clear that *fatherly practices* can have a reflexive character. Mr. Wagner gives an example:

He's got his own view, and his own will, with a kid it will always be, like: 'Here, eat your pudding, eat your meat, eat'. But [name of grandchild], he eats and he says: 'I'm not hungry anymore'. But there's just ONE more piece of meat left. Twenty years ago, I'd have just made him eat it. ... Then he also goes: 'Can I have some pudding?', he says. 'This is hard for me, [name of grandchild], see? Because I thought you were full.' 'Well,' he says, 'maybe I'll wait ten minutes, then'. So you compromise, see? No, but he wouldn't have gotten a pudding ... but I'm not making him eat. Back then, I would have made him. (Mr. Wagner, lines 520-528)

Others report that the care practice of grandfathers for rent is seen as something *unusual*. It "was impossible for them ... that a man could do that too" (Mr. Michel, lines 268-269). And it also had something *suspicious*, as Mr. Peter notes:

But in part I'm also not aware of how I'm seen there, I mean, when I pick up [name of grandchild] from kindergarten, whether they realize that I'm just an adopted grandfather and not the one related to him. (Mr. Peter, lines 763-765)

Overall, the care tasks can be described as having a masculine connotation (Horsfall and Dempsey, 2015): accounts by the grandfathers usually contain instrumental (transport services), educative, or leisure-focused care tasks. The latter are usually centered on the children's

hobbies (e.g. soccer) or the hobbies of the grandfathers, such as cycling or swimming. These activities generally take place out of the home and frequently without their spouses/partners.

During in-house care, the “co-presence” of grandmother and grandfather reveals a practice that puts the latter into a “helper or assistant position” (Horsfall and Dempsey, 2015, p. 1080). Mrs. Perez explains this in a story about their “typical daily routine”:

Then [mother and child] arrive, the little one disappears into the back of the sewing room right away, and there's the Lego blocks and a trampoline and he's busy with for a while ... then we eat ... he doesn't eat when we eat. Most of the time he eats later ... and during lunch you have to read to him and my husband does that. ... I eat or do the dishes or I'm in the kitchen. (Mrs. Perez, lines 545-567)

This gendered labor pattern is supported by the grandfathers' spouses/partners. Mrs. Holland talks about it with a certain emphasis:

And it is always my husband at the playground with the kids. That would really bug me! I'm not a playground grandma. My husband does all that. Everything with strength, and stuff. I'm there for the soft things, yes. (Mrs. Holland, lines 476-479)

3. Conclusion

By shedding light onto a phenomenon – grandfathers for rent – that has been inadequately studied since its emergence, we have won a complex picture. As expected, men are outnumbered by women in this field quantitatively. With that statistical insight at hand we felt even more curious about the practical side of becoming and being a grandfather for rent.

As our research findings indicate we are confronted with both selfish and altruistic motives: helping parents, knowing about one's own helplessness, giving time to others or expecting to receive future help. The latter introducing a difference between grandmothers for rent and their male counterparts. Becoming a grandfather for rent often involves the partner, who has access to or experience with this field. The reported practices reveal a broad, and at times ambivalent, spectrum of experiences, impressions and emotions. You maintain contact to the children's parents (especially true for grandmothers), yet you can find yourself caught between meddling in and keeping out of the parent's own educative efforts. Free time is willingly sacrificed, yet time sovereignty is largely preserved. Grandfathers articulate love and affection for the children they care for. What they do is largely considered to be what "normal" families would do. The practices of care bear gender specific implications. To be a grandfather for rent can help keep you young, but it also reveals physical limitations.

A theoretical look reveals a kind of *self-responsibilization* in connection with the care crisis, concretized in the assumption that the time potentials made available through retirement can (and should) become meaningful to others, as well as to yourself - without losing sight of ones' own time sovereignty. Grandfathers for rent (as well as grandmothers) are well aware of the changing conditions of care work and its consequences. They react to the reproduction crisis by making themselves a compensatory element of social infrastructure, hoping to at least partially close the gap in childcare demand.

Despite the often repeated credo that being active for others implies not aging yourself, being active as a grandfather for rent can very much result in effort and strain (van Dyk 2015, p. 105). Providing care makes you both *old* and *young* at the same time. In the case of the latter and especially in regard to out-house activities, grandfathers for rent can demonstrate physical strength and agility in and through sportive and bodily care activities, and by doing so they can demonstrate that they are (still) a *man*.. Or in other words: They are capable of reconnecting to

hegemonic masculinity, as the feeling and display of physical ability can provide them with hegemonic capital.

The question, whether grandfathers for rent transform or transgress (hegemonic) masculinity cannot be answered clearly. They express affection and love for the child they care for. One might argue, by caring for, they care about (Elliot, 2016). Concurrently, they revert to activities with male connotations. Many of the male interviewees justify their participation with a *sense of regret*. The resulting commitment of being a grandfather for rent touches upon a *modernization of masculinity* (Meuser, 2010). Reflecting their own role as fathers, displays of masculinity can be articulated in *softer* forms: a former strict, harsh and authoritarian father yields to an *empathetic* grandfather being present for the child, which is not to say that authoritarian implications disappear altogether. It can be argued that, while confronted with the societal task of renegotiating age and filling the gap of care supply in times of crisis, they adhere to a more nurturing image in the sense of caring masculinities. They are provided with a chance to reconcile masculinity with care and affection and counter to some extent the notion of hegemonic masculinity (Sorenson and Cooper 2010). At the same time, the care practice reproduces traditional gender roles.

4. Discussion

Our data contribute to the insight that more nurturing, more “caring” articulations of masculinity bear hegemonic implications, yielding the impression of a contradictory modernization of masculinity (Meuser, 2010) that is interrelated with a changing normative environment regarding age(ing) and with the challenges of the care crisis. We might nevertheless consider that caring masculinities even if they are partially or fully integrated into hegemonic expectations still provide a transformation potential, if we agree to the theoretical concessions, the hegemonic masculinity framework and its gender political implications provide (critical Howson, 2016)⁴.

If caring masculinities (as a concept and practice) enter the “serious games of competition” (Bourdieu, 1997, p. 203) within the dominant gender order, it may not automatically reestablish dominance and hierarchy at the very end. It may set, a “positive hegemony” (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005) which is open to equality, and may have democratizing effects on gender relations which are not subsumed under renewed relations of subordination. Yet, thinking into this direction has to take into account that the construction of the masculine identities and social practices are interconnected and embedded into changing sociocultural and sociopolitical environments. As our research contributes to the ambiguous findings of grandfather studies it might be fruitful to investigate a more diverse set of social divisions (e.g. spatiality, class, (dis)ability, ethnicity, sexual orientation: Hearn and Sandberg, 2009) that intersect with hegemonic masculinity. This might help to better understand the ambiguous, at times contradictory, experiences of older men who provide care and their relation to power. Further on, national variations of hegemonic masculinity as a concept and diverging traditions of theorizing men and masculinities ought to be taken into consideration more systematically – besides the aforementioned proposals. Hearn et al. (2012: 47) reviewing the use of hegemonic masculinity in research on men and boys in Sweden present other approaches of how this can be accomplished.

It is up to future research to investigate whether or not the current generation of grandfathers for rent is a transmission belt for change within the gender order in the long run. It might also be interesting to take a closer look at future generations of grandfathers for rent, who are over their lifespan somewhat stronger socialized by cultural expectations of the “involved father”.

¹ We also included private enterprises. Relevant data were taken from an online platform brokering care workers, which contained 4 men and 140 women aged 50 or older. Though each of the four grandfathers was contacted, none were available for an interview. For that reason we expensed with this particular mode of grandfatherhood for rent.

² The project also considered the precariousness of work and life (Marchart, 2010). We assumed that working as a remunerated grandfather for rent could emerge from precarious work or life situation. Neither our statistical data nor the interviewees themselves support such a thesis, though.

³ Names of the interviewees are anonymized.

⁴ Howson (2016) argues that efforts to remove hegemonic masculinity and its restorative system in and through hegemonic processes that rely on “de-gendering strategies” and “alliance politics” are incapable to tackle the issues of closure, which he presumes to be a crucial task to develop a progressive movement. Hegemony has to be understood not as a monolithic, homogenizing singular force, as Connell has conceptualized it. It should rather be considered as a complex system of knowledge in the Gramscian sense, which allows for a *radical pluralization strategy* that aims not at *de-* but *regendering*. It recognizes the *relationality of gender* with respect to other societal domains (e.g. work, law, media) which contribute to the production of gender knowledge in their own right, which have to be considered, systematically. For further insights: Howson, 2016.

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