

Why Postdivorce Fathers Do not Have Contact to their Children. A Case Study from Austria

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In examining current family structures and how they function, the fathers' role is largely regarded as less important. Demography and family sciences still focus primarily upon the mother or upon the couple. It is only in the last two decades that the research subject „father“ has continuously gained ground in German-language studies. Thus, the generative behavior of men and social fatherhood within the family context have only recently become subjects of research within demography and social sciences.

It can be concluded from the findings of studies of all industrial countries that the majority of children stay with their mothers after a separation. The dynamics of family forms in recent times show that the number of divorces and thus also the number of single mothers and affected children, as well as the number of fathers who become so-called “visiting fathers” is increasing. The aim of the present contribution, however, is not to examine the general situation of postdivorce fathers, but rather to cast light upon the “other side of the coin” of the relationship on the parental level, i.e. the father, from the standpoint of gender research in the context of demographic studies.

The extreme fragility of the post-separation father-child relationship is striking and requires closer examination. Efforts to quantify the amount of affected fathers were undertaken. In the present contribution, we focus upon a very specific aspect, namely, the characteristics of fathers who lose contact to their children after a divorce. In this way, we hope to come closer to the causes and motives that lead to the discontinuation of father-child relationships.

US-American discussion about the possible effects of separation and divorce on children and women in the 1980s and 90s is especially characterized by an intensive examination of the extent of disengagement of postdivorce fathers from their children. Here, it becomes evident that, after separating from their ex-partners, many fathers also lose contact to their children, or uphold their relationship to them to a very limited extent. The lack of studies on noncustodial fathers without contact to their children in German-speaking countries motivated us to examine this group in an Austrian case study.

The data used for this research is taken from a special survey within the context of the „Microcensus“, which was conducted by the National Austrian Statistics in 2001. Methodically, in a first step the single variables were cross-tabulated with the two target variables “extent of contact” and “loss of contact” and examined for recognizable trends and significance. In a second step, variables that are significant in the univariate statistics were included in logistic regression models.

The results show that within the scope of this study a quantification is only partially possible, very much in line with the deficit in research of the present situation conspicuous in the German-speaking region in general.

Based upon the theses of *Dudley* (1991), we postulated that the loss of contact would increase with the time elapsed since the divorce, and decrease with the age of the children at the time of separation, both assumptions which were confirmed. Thus, there is in fact a risk that over time contacts will be continually reduced or even cease completely. While in the univariate analysis the two factors are highly significant, in the bivariate regression the child's age at the time of divorce loses this influence. Thus, even father-child relationships that seemed to be stabilized by long years of cohabitation before the divorce fade with the length of time after separation and in part dissolve completely.

The more time has passed after a divorce, the more likely it is that the father's familial context may change. This assumption is backed up by the fact that new relationships often lead to a re-organisation of old habits and social contacts. In the case in question, this could redefine the relationship to children living elsewhere. As is substantiated in literature on the topic, new partnerships must be evaluated as an important factor influencing the quality of the post-separation father-child-relationship.

The influence of social contacts to the rest of the family must be regarded in a differentiated manner. In the results, the extent of contact to men's own father and their siblings proved a significant factor. References to the importance of the origin family as a paternal resource are to be found in literature (*Moch* 1999). According to these, men's own father's presence in

their childhood influences the extent to which interviewees maintain contact to their children after separation. Contrary to our original assumptions, however, the general extent of contact amongst relatives does not have a definite influence on contact frequency. Thus, a lack of contact with relatives does not translate to the extent of post-separation fathers' contact to their children.

An elevated social status, measured by the men's highest school degree and professional position as employees, also significantly decreases the probability of a loss of contact. Proof of this connection is also established in literature (*Amendt 2004 u.a.*).

One of the most important factors of influence was the temporal-local distance to the child. As in the analyses of *Furstenberg* and co-authors (1983), *Arditti/Keith* (1993), *Dudley* (1991), *Seltzer* (1991) as well as for Germany (*Fthenakis 1996, Schmitz 2000*), an increase in loss of contact was to be found with increased distances between places of residence. A greater amount of time required to pick up and bring back a child represents a substantial impediment to regular personal contact. The question as to why in such cases fathers also largely break off contact by phone remains unanswered. Furthermore, the causality of the factor „distance“ has not been clarified. Thus, it could also be that fathers have chosen a distant residence because of the foreseeable loss of contact.

In the general multiple model, distance to the child's place of residence as well as the period of time elapsed since divorce eclipsed all other influences, such that only these two remained significant.