Lukas Kammerlander

TAKING A CLOSER LOOK: DO MEN IN GERMANY RE- OR UN-LEARN MASCULINITY BEFORE A REDUCTION IN WORKING HOURS?

ABSTRACT

This article explores transformative learning processes preceding work time reductions in men in Germany. Drawing on qualitative data from biographical case studies, it investigates how men narrate and make sense of reducing their working hours, and how these learning processes relate to hegemonic masculinity. Building on Hoggan's (2016) transformative learning framework, the analysis examines the depth, breadth, and relative stability of the narrated transformations as well as their affective, epistemological, and behavioural dimensions. The findings show that while all analysed cases comprise significant learning processes, the orientation and gender-political implications of these transformations vary widely. The examined cases are grouped in relation to the processes of the hybridisation of hegemonic masculinity that allow symbolic distancing from traditional masculinity ideals without challenging structural privilege and more radical breaks with dominant norms. By linking masculinity, transitions, and transformative learning, the article contributes to understanding how men (un)learn masculinity in the context of life-course transitions and shifting gender orders.

Keywords: *transformative learning, biographical learning, men and masculinities, hybrid masculinity, work transitions*

PODROBNEJŠI POGLED: SE PRED SKRAJŠANJEM DELOVNEGA ČASA MOŠKI V NEMČIJI PONOVNO UČIJO ALI ODUČIJO MOŠKOSTI? – POVZETEK

V članku so predstavljeni transformativni učni procesi, do katerih prihaja pred skrajšanjem delovnega časa pri moških v Nemčiji. Na podlagi kvalitativnih podatkov iz biografskih študij primerov avtor raziskuje, kako moški pripovedujejo o skrajšanju delovnega časa in kako ga razumejo ter kako so ti učni procesi povezani s hegemono moškostjo. Analiza gradi na temeljih, ki jih je za transformativno učenje zastavil Hoggan (2016). Preučuje globino, širino in relativno stabilnost transformacij ter njihove afektivne, epistemološke in vedenjske dimenzije. Ugotovitve kažejo, da vsi analizirani primeri vključujejo pomembne učne procese, vendar se usmerjenost in spolnopolitične posledice teh transformacij med seboj zelo razlikujejo. Analizirani primeri so razvrščeni glede na procese hibridizacije z vidika hegemone moškosti. Ti procesi posamezniku sicer omogočajo simbolično distanciranje od tradicionalnih idealov moškosti, ne izpodbijajo pa strukturnih privilegijev in ne prinašajo radikalnih prelomov z dominantnimi normami. S povezovanjem moškosti, življenjskih prehodov in transformativnega

Lukas Kammerlander, Research Associate, *Goethe University Frankfurt, kammerlander@em.uni-frankfurt.de*

učenja članek prispeva k razumevanju, kako se moški v kontekstu življenjskih prehodov in spreminjajočih se spolnih redov (od)učijo moškosti.

Ključne besede: *transformativno učenje, biografsko učenje, moški in moškosti, hibridna moškost, prehodi na področju dela*

INTRODUCTION

In Germany, part-time work is relatively normalised and common compared to many other countries. There exists a legally guaranteed right to reduce working hours under certain conditions (e.g., company size, §8 TzBfG[1]). The proportion of part-time employees among all employees has increased sharply, rising from 14.0% in 1991 to 30.9% in 2023. However, the share of men and women employed on a part-time basis continues to differ massively: while 49.9% of all employed women were working part-time in 2023, only 13.3% of employed men were (Institut Arbeit und Qualifikation, 2024). Especially in middle age and among parents, the roles in the worlds of family and work are still widely assigned according to gender (Lott & Klenner, 2016). There are different reasons and explanations for these phenomena: Germany represents a conservative welfare regime (Esping-Andersen, 1990), the breadwinner-housewife marriage became the hegemonic and most frequently actualised family model in the middle of the 20th century (and has continued to have effect in the form of the modernised breadwinner model to this day; Keller & Kahle, 2018), and the gender pay gap as well as institutional contexts also contribute to this part-time gender gap. Essentially, full-time work is still the most common employment model for men in Germany, and the role of gainful employment in masculinity discourses and male life concepts remains significant despite changing economic conditions. Middle-aged men's self-initiated working hour reductions can therefore be considered non-normative transitions that might represent symbolic breaks with hegemonic orders of masculinity and notions of a normal, institutionalised life course. Against this backdrop, this article looks at reductions in men's working hours as non-normative transitions.

The aim of this paper is to investigate the work time reductions of men in Germany from the perspective of transformative learning. In this way, it seeks to understand the transformative learning processes that precede reductions in paid work hours and to explore how these relate to hegemonic masculinity. The paper argues that the empirical reconstruction of such learning processes can contribute to a better understanding of how masculinity is (un)learned and reconfigured in life course transitions. It draws on and contributes to debates on transformative learning, work transitions, and hegemonic masculinity – fields that have so far rarely been brought together systematically.

---

1   The German *Gesetz über Teilzeitarbeit und befristete Arbeitsverträge* (TzBfG; Bundesministerium der Justiz und für Verbraucherschutz, 2022) regulates part-time work and fixed-term contracts.

The paper first provides the theoretical background on transitions, masculinities, and transformative learning. A description of the methodological approach and the data used is followed by three empirical case studies. In these, the life history events and learning processes of men leading up to their work hour reduction will be examined. In a comparative analysis of these learning processes and a critical discussion informed by the concept of hegemonic masculinity, the paper explores what these cases reveal about transformative learning in the context of gender and work transitions.

TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING, NON-NORMATIVE WORK TRANSITIONS, AND HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY

As stated in the introduction, this paper understands the work time reductions of middle-aged men as transitions that are regularly marked as non-normative, and assumes that this ascribed non-normativity has to do with gender orders and masculinity. Following the concept of *doing transitions* (Walther et al., 2022), transitions are not understood as natural "social facts" (Durkheim, 1982, p. 50), but as being constantly produced in social practices. Transitions are not stable entities with clearly defined and fixed starting and ending points, but discursively, institutionally, and biographically framed processes. This focus on the emergence of transitions makes it possible to look at the discursive framework of (not) marking something as a transition, but also at the biographical genesis, the processes that lead to the actualisation of certain transitions. This is precisely what this paper attempts to do by seeking to reconstruct transformative learning processes leading up to work time reductions from the biographical narratives of men who have performed the above-mentioned transition.

Research on the relation between gender and work is long-standing and multifaceted. In the German context, qualitative studies have examined masculinity in relation to atypical fields of occupation for men (Buschmeyer, 2013), downshifting and part-time work (Buschmeyer, 2008; Gruhlich, 2023), and new fatherhood (Possinger, 2013). Quantitative research has analysed parental leave choices (Reimer, 2020; Schober, 2014), wage and career opportunities for men exercising their right to paternal leave (Bünning, 2016), part-time work over the life course (Althaber, 2022), working and care time budgets (Klünder & Meier-Gräwe, 2017; Walper & Lien, 2017) and many more issues.

Since Elliott's (2016) theoretical outline of "caring masculinities", which she characterises as "masculine identities that exclude domination and embrace the affective, relational, emotional, and interdependent qualities of care" (p. 252), a body of research dealing with transformations in the performance of masculinity away from exclusion and domination has emerged (e.g., Elliott & Roberts, 2024; Lee & Lee, 2018), always with the implicit thesis that such changes entail a transformation of gender relations.

However, the link between individual-level changes and macro-level transformations of gender relations often remains vague. Transformative learning as a concept has rarely been employed to analyse changing masculinity performances over the life course, and

the few attempts that exist (e.g., Eschenbacher & Weber, 2023) remain theoretical. Also, when learning masculinity is the subject of research, studies mostly deal with the processes of socialisation in adolescence and young adulthood (e.g., Harding, 2022; Harris & Struve, 2009; Sherriff, 2007; Waterman et al., 2020). This paper aims to address these gaps by reconstructing processes of (un-/re-)learning masculinity in adult male biographies preceding the non-normative transition of a work time reduction. In contrast to Bernhard (2024), who reconstructs learning processes during and after transitions in the form of migration processes, this article therefore looks for learning processes ahead of a transition. In doing so, it makes use of transformative learning theory as a theoretical link between the observation of the changing practices of men and the question whether these changing expressions reflect a weakening of hegemonic masculinity.

To this end, masculinity is conceptualised as a relational practice in this paper, following Connell (2005), who understands hegemonic masculinity as "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy" (p. 77; see also Carrigan et al., 1985). Connell (2005) differentiates between hegemonic, subordinated, marginalised, and complicit masculinities. Importantly, hegemonic masculinity is not a fixed type of "classical masculinity" but a contested position within the gender order, adaptable and historically contingent. In this way, Connell's (2005) theoretical proposal is more advanced than many instances of its reception that merely understand hegemonic masculinity as a modern, Western, aggressive or "loud" form of masculinity. Recent debates question whether changes in men's practices represent a dissolution or an adaptation of hegemonic masculinity. Inclusive masculinity theory (Anderson, 2009) describes a decline of homohysteria and an emergence of more emotionally open, egalitarian masculinities. However, critics (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014; Demetriou, 2001; Messner, 1993) argue that such changes often represent hybrid masculinities – strategic borrowings from marginalised forms that symbolically distance men from domination without changing structural power relations. Three mechanisms are central: discursive distancing, strategic borrowing, and fortifying symbolic boundaries (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014). This paper aims to shed light on the (re-/un)learning of masculinity in adulthood by reconstructing the processes and outcomes of transformative learning ahead of work time reductions, thus allowing for these learning processes and their outcomes to be discussed against the backdrop of hegemonic masculinity.

Transformative learning is understood here, following Hoggan (2016), as a process that results in significant, broad, and relatively stable changes in how people experience, conceptualise, and interact with the world. In adult education research, various concepts have been developed under the term "transformative learning", which aim to bring about far-reaching changes in relationships with the self and the world. While Mezirow (2000) works with a focus on cognitive changes in perspective, his approach has been increasingly criticised for its emphasis on rationalism and lack of embedding in social contexts (Taylor & Cranton, 2013). More recent approaches (Eschenbacher & Fleming, 2020; Hoggan, 2016; Lange, 2018) understand transformative learning processes as holistic,

experience-based, and contextually embedded. Transformative learning, in this view, is not limited to formal education but unfolds across the life course, especially in response to disruptions and critical events. Transitions, especially non-normative ones, will therefore often be preceded by comprehensive learning processes. This is echoed in biographical learning theory (Alheit, 2018), which emphasizes learning as life-spanning transformation shaped by social structures and personal histories.

Based on these theoretical developments, the empirical part of the article makes use of a meta-theoretical understanding of transformative learning processes, as proposed by Hoggan (2016). He provides a metatheoretical framework for analysing such learning processes, focusing on the depth, breadth, and stability of change as well as outcomes such as identity shifts, new epistemologies, and relational competencies. His proposal to analyse transformations on the basis of the three dimensions of depth, breadth, and relative stability serves as an analytical grid. Here, breadth refers to the range of the areas affected by the change (e.g., thinking, feeling, acting, body, relationships), depth describes the hierarchical location of the change within the structure of subjective experience (e.g., behaviour vs world view), and stability refers to the sustainability of the change. In addition, Hoggan (2016) proposes a differentiated systematisation of learning outcomes in order to better capture the quality of transformative learning processes. He distinguishes between different levels at which changes can take place: worldview, self, epistemology, ontology, behaviour, and capacity. According to Hoggan (2016), learning processes that go beyond purely cognitive reinterpretations and also include affective, identity-related, and social dimensions are particularly significant. In this way, transformative learning processes can be understood not only as individual rethinking, but also as a comprehensive reorientation in relation to the world. These differentiations allow for a concise description and evaluation of learning processes.

Drawing on these perspectives, this article examines how life history events leading up to work time reductions are processed by men as learning experiences, and how these learning processes relate to hegemonic masculinity. It asks: *What kinds of transformative learning processes and outcomes can be reconstructed from the biographical narratives of men who have reduced their working hours? How do these learning processes and their outcomes relate to hegemonic masculinity?*

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Hoggan's (2016) meta-theoretical definition that "[t]ransformative learning refers to processes that result in significant and irreversible changes in the way a person experiences, conceptualises, and interacts with the world" (p. 71) serves as a heuristic device in the empirical part of this paper. The various criteria of this definition (depth, breadth, stability, and typology of learning outcomes) were used as analytical guidelines for the case reconstructions.

For the purpose of empirically answering the overarching research question of this article, according to the principle of theoretical sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 2006), three cases

were selected from a dissertation project. The narrative structure of the selected cases allowed for the learning processes to be reconstructed particularly well, and the cases also show a number of contrasts with each other in relation to the reasons given for the reduction in working hours, in relation to the remaining working hours, and in relation to the agency ascribed to the protagonists in the process of reducing their work hours.

The data collection and analysis took place within the framework of a qualitative-interpretative research design and is oriented towards the principles of grounded theory methodology (GTM), in particular towards reflexive GTM as proposed by Breuer et al. (2019). The interpretation for this paper followed a multi-stage procedure. Firstly, a dense case description was created, which reconstructed the life events biographically marked as relevant for the transition of reducing work hours. Building on this, a sequential interpretation of the central text passages was carried out with a view to identify and examine learning processes in Hoggan's (2016) sense. The analysis focused on the following empirical questions: Which narrated life history events prior to the reduction in working hours can be conceptualised as transformative learning processes that are directly or indirectly linked to the transition of the reduction in working hours? In what ways are the considered life history events changing the participants' ways of thinking and existing and their behaviour? How significant (deep and broad) and irreversible (not just temporary) are these changes?

Following this reconstruction, presented below in the form of three case studies that illustrate the respective life history events, learning processes and content, a critical reflection on these learning processes in relation to the concept of hegemonic masculinity is carried out. This part attempts to answer the question: What do the reconstructed learning processes and their outcomes tell us about work time reductions in terms of (the changing forms of) hegemonic masculinity?

All of the transcript excerpts used in this article have been translated into English, and all of the interviewees' names have been changed to pseudonyms.

HELMUT: UNLEARNING WORK WITHOUT RELEARNING MASCULINITY

Helmut, who was 45 years old at the time of the interview, had run his own supermarket before selling it shortly beforehand. The wealth he has accumulated by running this business will allow him to live without an income from work for the foreseeable future. Helmut originally embarked on his career in order to be able to financially provide for his family after becoming a father in a rather unplanned manner at the age of 22. For years, working in the supermarket was a strong source of identity for him. In recent years, however, Helmut had become increasingly weary of what he saw as the weakening work ethic of his employees. His heavy workload had also taken its toll on his health and led to burnout. Finally, and crucially, the death of Helmut's son (one of two children) from a congenital autoimmune disease at the age of 19 raised profound questions about the meaning of work. He therefore decided to sell the supermarket and live on his own terms and, at the time of the interview, was enjoying his newly gained leisure time.

Helmut's life story is characterised by professional success, family obligations, and a change triggered by personal experiences of loss. In his narrative retrospective, it becomes clear that his professional development was characterised by the classic idea of performance and responsibility: "In the end, it always turned out to my liking [...] I just did a good job". His role as the family breadwinner was central to him for a long time: "It was always family before me". His previous family-centred outlook ("My wife got pregnant, so I went to my boss and told him that I needed to advance professionally and earn a bit of money for my family") changed slightly towards a more self-centred perspective when his wife temporarily left him for another man when he was in his mid-30s:

> At the end of the day … you're always alone. You're even more likely to have a mate stand by you than your family. [...] So with every decision I've made in my life since then, the question has always been: 'Is this the right decision for <u>me</u>?'

This increased focus on his own needs was fortified by disappointments in social relationships with co-workers ("I thought they were friends [...] and then they didn't look at you with their arses") and employees in his supermarket ("People used to enjoy working. But the current generation has changed"). These repeated experiences contributed to a growing disillusionment and a retreat into the private sphere. Helmut "learnt somewhere along the way that the only person you can rely on is ultimately yourself".

The most profound biographical turning point in Helmut's narrative, however, is his son's death. For his son, "there was simply no tomorrow at some point", Helmut reflects, realising that "normal life might pass you by". In this existential experience, a process of realisation occurs that places the value of health and time above material goods: "No amount of money in the world [...] will keep you alive […] [and] the most valuable thing you have is health and time". These realisations form the basis for Helmut's later complete abandonment of gainful employment.

He says that the experience of burnout deepened this change: "I found it difficult to motivate myself to work for weeks [...] it was really an effort of will". One particular moment of being completely overwhelmed – unable to decide between "pissing, answering the phone, accepting a delivery of goods and getting coffee" – marks a tipping point as Helmut experiences the limits of the functioning on his own body. The decision to stop working is therefore presented as the result of cumulative emotional and physical exhaustion.

The framework within which Helmut makes his decision to give up his job nevertheless represents an *iteration* of the idea of autonomous male decision-making rather than a drastic reorientation in regard to the performance of masculinity. He keeps the traditional gender roles in his relationship in place ("I'm the boss at the company, she's the boss at home"), and it is an important element of the narrative that Helmut's role as a male breadwinner is not affected at all by his withdrawal from paid work. The material wealth that his work has provided is explained in detail, and emphasis is put on the fact that the income from these assets will also provide material security for his family in the future:

> I've organised it in a way that the properties I have can or will be inherited, and the financial means I have at my disposal will be enough to provide for me until retirement age and the day I kick the bucket.

In conclusion, Helmut's learning processes ahead of giving up work are formed by the existential impact of the loss of his son on the one hand, and are built upon the idea of unrestricted individual agency on the other. Grief and exhaustion but also disappointment and anger are emotionally present and accompany his change. Helmut learns that health and time are invaluable yet unavailable commodities, and that his previous self-image as an inexhaustible provider is reaching its limits. However, these feelings do not lead to a fundamental reconfiguration of gender roles, but rather to withdrawal, simplification, and traditional re-anchoring. Helmut has given up work completely but continues to arrange his life based on rather traditional ideals of masculinity and a hardly challenged gendered division of work.

STEFFEN: RELEARNING MASCULINITY THROUGH ADAPTATION

Steffen was 35 years old at the time of the interview and worked as a social worker, providing support to families in their everyday lives. His biography is characterised by a clear break with the conservative influences of his childhood. He describes his socialisation in a pietistic environment dominated by strict moral views: "no sex before marriage and homosexuality isn't cool". This early moulding initially remained unquestioned but was increasingly challenged by his own experiences and new values.

He studied social work, which led him to move to a larger city for the first time, representing the first important source of his reorientation. After his studies, Steffen briefly worked in a factory, where his colleagues – "sad people" – greatly alienated him by openly boasting about visiting brothels all over Germany or going on holidays to Thailand, where they would hire a sex worker for the duration. At the same time, Steffen got married and took his wife's surname, which is a rather unusual practice in Germany (Gesellschaft für deutsche Sprache, 2018), and he also presents as an unconventional move on his own part.

The most central motif of his transformation, however, is Steffen's becoming a father: "I don't want to work 100 per cent anymore [...] as long as the children are small". He marks the birth of his son as a turning point in his thoughts and actions, which led him to begin to reorganise his working life and actively shape family care. The reduction of his working hours to 85% is directly linked to this biographical transition. It is important to Steffen that he is fully able to look after his older son on his own for several days without the support of his wife: "My wife can be away for a weekend and everything works out, and I am able to manage on my own, even when he is sick or anything like that". In his view, this is also in his own interest, as he wants to be more involved in his children's upbringing than his own father was: "My father was not very present in my everyday life, but I want to be in my children's". The experience of taking care of the child on his own for entire days at a time has proved formative: "Realising how exhausting it is to have to focus on this

child all day long made me understand how hard it is at home". This concrete everyday experience led to a re-evaluation of care work and contributed to Steffen turning away from classic ideas of masculinity: "I don't want to define myself as a man by my name or how much I work, but […] by how I fulfil my responsibilities in my family".

Social feedback stabilises this change in perspective: he regularly receives positive feedback, especially from women in his environment; they say "it's really cool how much work I do at home". The active confrontation with conservative attitudes in his family (e.g., in the WhatsApp family chat: "There's an extended family WhatsApp chat, and one aunt often shares stuff that's pretty right-wing, probably even AfD-related. […] I've spoken up about it – like, 'What's the problem if two men or two women live together?'") and the conscious decision to depart from traditional norms that have characterised his upbringing show the breadth and depth of his transformation: "I am able to depart from norms because I can look back on my earlier days". The following reflection on his working hours also shows how strongly anchored his new attitude is: "I don't live for the job […] it serves my life". At the same time, however, a certain imbalance remains: Steffen continues to work in a 85% part-time position, while his partner works considerably less.

To sum up, Steffen has learned that caring is not a "female" area but is part of fatherhood. He has developed an attitude of responsibility and equality that goes against traditional role expectations. His transformation can therefore also be understood as an affective reorientation that encompasses care, empathy, and emotional labour – but within a setting that in part still reproduces hegemonic structures.

LARS: RE-/UNLEARNING MASCULINITY THROUGH FAILURE

Lars worked in a 50% part-time position as a project employee in public administration and was 34 years old at the time of the interview. He predominantly tells his life story as one of suffering and failure. His story begins with a deep biographical injury: he reports of systematic physical and sexualised violence and systematic bullying at school, being "the one who simply was the target of the violence in the end". A long-lasting feeling of weakness, non-belonging, and deficient masculinity developed from these experiences: "I was signalled in all parts of my life: You are worth nothing, you are a weak little boy".

At university, he developed new areas of thought and experience: "All of a sudden, completely new perspectives opened up". In his encounter with his first girlfriend, Malin, and by travelling, Lars experienced an expansion of his worldview both culturally and emotionally. His relationship with Malin and the confrontation with his own sexuality, emotional dependency, and fidelity led to a profound process of self-questioning and a re-localisation of the masculine. For the first time in his life, his own qualities as an "emotionally sensitive, process-oriented man, who is focused on social connection – someone who embodies traits that are stereotypically attributed to women" prove to be useful to him, and Lars also considers them useful for the community: "This kind of masculinity […] is needed in our society".

However, Lars' doctorate, which initially began as a continuation of his intellectual self-discovery, led to a profound crisis. Conflicts with his supervisor, a lack of structure, and a loss of confidence led to an existential shake-up: "I was so completely depressed […] I had no identity anymore". Through his own experience of failure and the despair he felt over it, Lars has realised how strongly patriarchal orders still prevail in the academic field, for example, in the way his mentor at the university gives jobs to his (male) friends under the table. In Lars' eyes, success in this system does not depend on academic excellence or even on the willingness to perform, but primarily on whether those involved are prepared to laugh at the boss's "chauvinistic jokes […] in the evening, over a beer, eating a steak". In this way, Lars has confronted the end of his own academic career, and thus also attributes the collapse of his attempt to build an identity as an academic to male nepotism and structures of male domination that still exist at the university.

He has reduced his working time to 50% because, as he says himself, he is "not able to work more, because I am still […] picking up the emotional pieces from this experience". The reduction in working hours is therefore not a conscious strategic decision, but a necessary reaction to emotional overload and the loss of trust in the academic system. In the end, Lars' biographical crisis nonetheless has become the source of an active redesign. Lars has developed a new understanding of his own body by taking up a new sport: "I discovered that fitness is something that […] every […] normally developed person can learn to a certain degree". He engages in spiritual practices such as meditation, seeks out communities that affirm his being, and creates a counter-model to hegemonic masculinity that encompasses care, emotionality, and social responsibility:

> Via the internet […] I can connect with people from all over the world […] who are moving in the same direction. I can listen to podcasts and read articles, benefit from their experience and wisdom, and I can feel connected in a whole new way. It wouldn't work without this international community for me.

Lars' learning processes are highly transformative, ranging from changes in his worldview and self-concept to concrete behaviour and new skills. Depth, breadth, and stability are particularly pronounced: Lars has succeeded in developing a new relationship with himself and the world.

In Lars' case, fear, pain, disappointment, and ultimately hope structure his learning processes. He has learned that sensitivity, emotionality, and vulnerability are not weaknesses but central resources for connection and realisation. He is deconstructing the dominant images of masculinity, reflecting on structural inequalities in academic and social systems, and tapping into a new form of self-efficacy based on mindfulness, community, and reflexivity. His transformation is comprehensive: it affects thinking, feeling, acting, and the body in equal measure.

All three case portraits show profound biographical learning processes ahead of working time reduction. While all three participants have undergone learning processes that can

be understood as transformative in Hoggan's (2016) sense, they differ significantly in their structure, orientation, and dynamics as well as in the domains that they influence. These similarities and differences will be compared in the next section of this article.

COMPARING TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING PROCESSES PRECEDING WORK TIME REDUCTIONS

All three cases show transformations of considerable *depth*. For Steffen and Lars, these are active, emancipatory learning processes that deal with questions central to their own identity, gender understanding, and social norms. Helmut, on the other hand, has been undergoing a transformation that is more strongly characterised by loss and resignation. While Steffen has realigned his relationship with himself and the world through the birth of his child and the associated experience of care work, Lars has undergone a complex chain of experiences: from early violence to emotional relationships, academic challenges, and spiritual practice. Helmut has been forced to reflect and change because of the death of his son, the experience of professional exhaustion, and a growing disillusionment in social relationships. The *breadth* of change varies. Steffen and Lars have experienced changes in every area of their lives: family and relationships, work, gender roles, political awareness, physical practice, emotion, and self-concept. For Helmut, the changes are more focused on values and occupation, so there is a certain breadth here as well, but it is less multidimensional. As for the *stability* of the changes, all three men have clearly integrated their new perspectives into their everyday thoughts and actions. Steffen has developed fixed routines for organising his family and career life in a partnership-based way, Helmut is selectively withdrawing from old patterns by reducing his working hours and living more health-consciously, and Lars' transformation is anchored in spiritual, physical, and communal practices.

Applying Hoggan's (2016) typology of transformative learning outcomes, it becomes evident that the cases differ in characteristics and emphases of the impacted areas. With regard to their *worldview*, all three men show a turning away from their earlier convictions: Steffen turns away from conservative religious norms, Helmut recognises the illusion of material success, and Lars deconstructs heteronormative and patriarchal academic ideas. Lars in particular also places this transformation in a political context, for example, when he discusses the necessity of an emancipated image of masculinity. The *self-concepts* of all three participants are also subject to significant change: Steffen reinterprets his role as a father, Helmut begins to see himself as worthy of protection and not just as a functional resource, and Lars reconstructs himself as a sensitive, spiritual and connected man, who not only accepts his "female-connoted" qualities, but also understands them as socially necessary. *Epistemological changes* are reflected in the questioning of dominant patterns of knowledge and interpretation. For example, Steffen realises that care is not an exclusively "female" task or quality. Helmut relativises his idea of control and planning, while Lars explicitly analyses existing knowledge systems. *Ontological changes* – that is, new ways of relating to the world and one's own body – are particularly evident in Lars' practice of meditation, sports, and emotional mindfulness. For Steffen, the physical experience of

care seems noteworthy in this context. Helmut processes the death of his son as an existential experience that shatters his entire understanding of life. All three participants also introduce *behavioural changes* in their everyday lives. Steffen reduces his working hours, takes on more responsibility at home, and organises care work. Helmut withdraws and lives more consciously. Lars establishes new routines, seeks out new social environments, and gives up his academic career. Finally, their individual *capacities* (skills and abilities) evolve: Steffen develops social and communicative abilities, Helmut emotional resilience and boundaries, and Lars social, political, and spiritual self-efficacy. The following table summarises the contents of Helmut's, Steffen's and Lars' respective learning processes prior to their work time reductions.

Table 1

Interviewees' learning processes before work time reductions

	Helmut	Steffen	Lars
Worldview	Devaluation of material wealth; focus on health and time	Rejection of conservative norms; new understanding of care	Deconstruction of heteronormative norms and prevailing power structures in the academic field
Self	Increased self-centredness after separation and loss of his son	New self-image as a caring father; reflexive masculinity	New self-image as a sensitive, connected man
Epistemology	Insight into the limits of previous values (e.g., performance)	Openness to alternative interpretations	Criticism of gender, power, masculinity
Ontology	Processing loss and existential fragility	Emotional depth through father role	Integration of body, emotion, and spirituality
Behaviour	Reducing occupational stress	Reducing working hours; organising everyday life on an equal footing	New practices: meditation, sports, community
Capacities	Resilience, self-protection, boundary-setting	Competencies in care, communication, reflection	Self-efficacy, political awareness, community orientation

THE RECONSTRUCTED LEARNING PROCESSES AND HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY

The learning processes reconstructed above make it clear that for men a reduction in working hours is not automatically accompanied by a rejection of hegemonic masculinity. In fact, it becomes clear how differently such decisions are biographically framed, emotionally processed and framed in terms of gender.

Helmut's learning process is characterised by massive biographical incisions, specifically the loss of his son and a burnout experience. These events interrupt his previously stable self-positioning as a capable provider. However, his reaction to them reveals a reactive

adherence to familiar patterns. Helmut's change is deeply anchored in affect – grief, exhaustion, and disappointment characterise his narrative – but does not lead to reflection on gender relations. In other words, Helmut's recognition of his own limits does not lead to a destabilisation of male privileges, but rather to their reorganisation in the private sphere.

Steffen integrates caretaking ("I rather define myself by how I am as a father") into a life model that continues to be characterised by the male as the primary breadwinner. This selective appropriation of elements of care work previously labelled as "feminine" allows for a symbolic distancing from hegemonic masculinity (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014) without structurally undermining it. Steffen receives social recognition for his behaviour, especially from women, a phenomenon which Messner (1993) described as "more style than substance", as emotionality and participation are performed while the economic position of power remains untouched. Steffen's learning processes are affective and show a certain depth, but ultimately they may signify little more than a new variant of male dominance in a more caring package.

Lars, by contrast, embodies an explicitly counter-hegemonic masculinity. His biography shows a critical engagement with the dominant patterns of masculinity: "This kind of masculinity [...] is needed". Experiences of violence, powerlessness, and alienation (e.g., at school or in the context of his doctorate) lead to comprehensive reflection on the structural norms of masculinity. Lars not only develops new affective competencies, but also alternative practices and self-images, for example, through meditation, athletic self-empowerment, and a clear positioning against these masculinity norms. Elements of explicit counter-hegemony can be identified in his transformation. Lars' learning encompasses not only a new practice but a fundamental questioning of gender order patterns.

In comparison, Steffen's case seems to adhere to Bridges' and Pascoe's thesis that hybrid forms of masculinity may create symbolic distance to traditional forms of masculinity, but at the same time institutionally stabilise male hegemony. Steffen stands for a reorganisation of hegemonic masculinity, a hybridised reformation of male subjectivity that combines proximity to care work with the structural reproduction of male power (see Bridges & Pascoe, 2014). His learning process before the reduction in working hours can be called *adaptive*. Helmut rejects change by withdrawal. His affective transformation, however, does not lead to any reflection on gender or questioning of hegemonic masculinity. The learning mode that he embodies is best described as *reactive*. Lars shows some signs of resistance against hegemonic masculinity by using his affective crisis as a resource for a critical transformation of masculinity that goes beyond hegemonic positions. His learning can be understood as *critical-transgressive*.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this article was to explore transformative learning processes which men undergo before they reduce their working hours, and how these processes relate to hegemonic masculinity. In the three biographical case analyses, which draw on Hoggan's (2016)

meta-theoretical understanding of transformative learning, it was possible to work out that the transition is indeed preceded by profound learning processes in all three cases, but that these differ significantly in terms of structure, orientation, and gender-political implications.

All three cases show significant changes in the self-image and worldview of the interviewees. However, these reorientations differ significantly in terms of content and form. While Helmut's clear affective reorientation does not include any questioning of traditional gender roles (*reactive* learning), Steffen's case shows a selective appropriation of care practices previously connoted as feminine (*adaptive* learning). The relationship of these appropriations to hegemonic masculinity appears ambivalent: as his breadwinner status is only slightly adapted, it could be argued that Steffen primarily learns to symbolically distance himself from traditional notions of masculinity and to justify his lifestyle in terms of gender politics, a finding that can be read in the sense of a hybridisation of hegemonic masculinity (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014). Lars' explicit criticism of the hegemonic patterns of masculinity and his simultaneous establishment of alternative self and world relations, from political activism to spiritual practices, on the other hand, must be understood as a comprehensive transformation (*critical-transgressive* learning).

By focusing on the re- and unlearning of masculinities, this article sheds light on a topic that has so far received little attention in adult education research on transformative learning. With its empirical findings, it also contributes to critical studies on men and masculinities by illuminating the relationship between transformative learning processes prior to the non-normative transition of reducing work hours and hegemonic orders of masculinity. By conceptualising life events as transformative learning, both the potential and limits of individual transformation in gender relations become visible. It becomes clear that a reduction in working hours is not per se an expression of gender-political transformation. Rather, it depends on how this decision is processed biographically, experienced affectively, and framed socially. In this sense, reductions in working hours present an ambiguous practice: they can be the result of comprehensive transformation and reflection processes, but they do not have to be. Analysing them in the light of transformative learning processes therefore allows for deeper insight into the dynamics of male subjectivation in transition.

This paper is based on a small qualitative sample and is therefore explorative in character. By using biographical self-representations as empirical data, the emphasis of the study lies on subjective learning processes, while structural and institutional framework conditions are only marginally visible. In addition, the sample lacks diversity in terms of dimensions such as ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation. Future research could expand the sample and include longitudinal designs to better understand the stability and development of transformative learning processes over time. A stronger consideration of institutional and structural conditions – for example, in the education system or in the workplace – would also make it possible to better contextualise individual transformations. Finally, an intersectional perspective could provide deeper insights into how the processes involved in the (re)configuration of masculinity are shaped by social structures and differences.

Acknowledgements

Funding

REFERENCES

Alheit, P. (2018). Biographical learning – within the lifelong learning discourse. In K. Illeris (Ed.), *Contemporary theories of learning: Learning theorists... In their own words* (2nd ed., pp. 116–128). Routledge.

Althaber, A. (2022). *Teilzeitarbeit im Lebensverlauf von Männern: Zur beruflichen Strukturierung von Übergängen und Konsequenzen*. Budrich Academic Press. https://doi.org/10.3224/96665046

Anderson, E. (2009). *Inclusive masculinity*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203871485

Bernhard, M. (2024). Learning by doing migration: Temporal dimensions of life course transitions. *Studies in Continuing Education, 46*(2), 282–298. https://doi.org/10.1080/0158037X.2023.2223131

Breuer, F., Muckel, P., & Dieris, B. (2019). *Reflexive grounded theory: Eine Einführung für die Forschungspraxis*. Springer VS. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-22219-2

Bridges, T., & Pascoe, C. J. (2014). Hybrid masculinities: New directions in the sociology of men and masculinities. *Sociology Compass*, *8*(3), 246–258. https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12134

Bundesministerium der Justiz und für Verbraucherschutz. (2022). *Gesetz über Teilzeitarbeit und befristete Arbeitsverträge (Teilzeit- und Befristungsgesetz - TzBfG)*. https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/tzbfg/BJNR196610000.html

Bünning, M. (2016). Die Vereinbarkeitsfrage für Männer: Welche Auswirkungen haben Elternzeiten und Teilzeitarbeit auf die Stundenlöhne von Vätern? *KZfSS Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, *68*(4), 597–618. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11577-016-0387-0

Buschmeyer, A. (2008). Männlichkeitskonstruktionen Teilzeit arbeitender Väter. In N. Baur & J. Luedtke (Eds.), *Die soziale Konstruktion von Männlichkeit: Hegemoniale und marginalisierte Männlichkeiten in Deutschland* (1st ed., pp. 123–140). Verlag Barbara Budrich. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvndv9jf

Buschmeyer, A. (2013). *Zwischen Vorbild und Verdacht: Wie Männer im Erzieherberuf Männlichkeit konstruieren*. Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-00990-8

Carrigan, T., Connell, B., & Lee, J. (1985). Toward a new sociology of masculinity. *Theory and Society*, *14*(5), 551–604. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00160017

Connell, R. (2005). *Masculinities* (2nd ed.). University of California Press.

Demetriou, D. Z. (2001). Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity: A critique. *Theory and Society, 30*(3), 337–361. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1017596718715

Durkheim, E. (1982). *The rules of sociological method* (S. Lukes, Ed.). Macmillan Education UK. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-16939-9

Elliott, K. (2016). Caring masculinities: Theorizing an emerging concept. *Men and Masculinities*, *19*(3), 240–259. https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X15576203

Elliott, K., & Roberts, S. (2024). Caring masculinities among working-class men in blue-collar occupations in the UK: Understanding biographies of care. *Gender, Work & Organization*, *31*(5), 1690–1706. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12936

Eschenbacher, S., & Fleming, T. (2020). Transformative dimensions of lifelong learning: Mezirow, Rorty and COVID-19. *International Review of Education, 66*(5–6), 657–672. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-020-09859-6

Eschenbacher, S., & Weber, N. (2023). Deconstructing gender identity through transformative learning. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, *55*(2), 427–440. https://doi.org/10.1080/02660830.2023.2243660

Esping-Andersen, G. (1990). *The three worlds of welfare capitalism*. Princeton University Press.

Gesellschaft für deutsche Sprache. (2018). *Familiennamen bei der Heirat und Vornamenprognose 2018*. Gesellschaft Für Deutsche Sprache e.V. https://gfds.de/familiennamen-bei-der-heirat-und-vornamenprognose-2018/

Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (2006). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Routledge.

Gruhlich, J. (2023). „Karriere ist nicht alles" – Ursachen, Motive und Legitimationsmuster von „Downshifting". *Zeitschrift Für Soziologie*, *52*(3), 322–337. https://doi.org/10.1515/zfsoz-2023-2022

Harding, S. N. (2022). 'Boys, when they do dance, they have to do football as well, for balance': Young men's construction of a sporting masculinity. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, *57*(1), 19–33. https://doi.org/10.1177/1012690220987144

Harris, F., & Struve, L. E. (2009). Gents, jerks, and jocks: What male students learn about masculinity in college. *About Campus*, *14*(3), 2–9. https://doi.org/10.1002/aca.289

Hoggan, C. D. (2016). Transformative learning as a metatheory: Definition, criteria, and typology. *Adult Education Quarterly, 66*(1), 57–75. https://doi.org/10.1177/0741713615611216

Institut Arbeit und Qualifikation. (2024). *Teilzeitquote insgesamt und nach Geschlecht 1991-2023*. https://www.sozialpolitik-aktuell.de/files/sozialpolitik-aktuell/_Politikfelder/Arbeitsmarkt/Datensammlung/PDF-Dateien/abbIV8d.pdf

Keller, M., & Kahle, I. (2018). Realisierte Erwerbstätigkeit von Vätern und Müttern: Zur Vereinbarkeit von Familie und Beruf. *WISTA – Wissenschaft Und Statistik*, *3*, 54–71.

Klünder, N., & Meier-Gräwe, U. (2017). Gleichstellung und innerfamiliale Arbeitsteilung. In Statistisches Bundesamt (Ed.), *Wie die Zeit vergeht: Analysen zur Zeitverwendung in Deutschland* (pp. 65–90). Statistisches Bundesamt.

Lange, E. A. (2018). Transforming transformative education through ontologies of relationality. *Journal of Transformative Education, 16*(4), 280–301. https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344618786452

Lee, J. Y., & Lee, S. J. (2018). Caring is masculine: Stay-at-home fathers and masculine identity. *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*, *19*(1), 47–58. https://doi.org/10.1037/men0000079

Lott, Y., & Klenner, C. (2016). *Ideal workers and ideal parents: Working-time norms and the acceptance of part-time and parental leave at the workplace in Germany* [WSI Working Paper No. 204]. WSI.

Messner, M. (1993). 'Changing Men' and Feminist Politics in the United States. *Theory and Society, 22*(5), 723–37. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00993545

Mezirow, J. (2000). *Learning as transformation: Critical perspectives on a theory in progress* (1st ed.). Jossey-Bass.

Possinger, J. (2013). *Vaterschaft im Spannungsfeld von Erwerbs- und Familienleben: 'neuen Vätern' auf der Spur*. Springer VS.

Reimer, T. (2020). Why fathers don't take more parental leave in Germany: Comparing mechanisms in different work organizations. *Community, Work & Family*, *23*(4), 419–438. https://doi.org/10.1080/13668803.2019.1608157

Schober, P. S. (2014). Parental leave and domestic work of mothers and fathers: A longitudinal study of two reforms in West Germany. *Journal of Social Policy*, *43*(2), 351–372. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279413000809

Sherriff, N. (2007). Peer group cultures and social identity: An integrated approach to understanding masculinities. *British Educational Research Journal*, *33*(3), 349–370. https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920701243628

Taylor, E. W., & Cranton, P. (2013). A theory in progress? Issues in transformative learning theory. *European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults*, *4*(1), 33–47. https://doi.org/10.25656/01:7705

Walper, S., & Lien, S. (2017). Aktive Vaterschaft im Kontext unterschiedlicher Familienphasen und Erwerbskonstellationen. In Statistisches Bundesamt (Ed.), *Wie die Zeit vergeht: Analysen zur Zeitverwendung in Deutschland* (pp. 91–116). Statistisches Bundesamt.

Walther, A., Stauber, B., & Settersten, R. A. (2022). "Doing Transitions": A new research perspective. In B. Stauber, A. Walther, & R. A. Settersten, (Eds.), *Doing Transitions in the Life Course* (Vol. 16, pp. 3–18). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-13512-5_1

Waterman, E. A., Wesche, R., Leavitt, C. E., & Lefkowitz, E. S. (2020). Fraternity membership, traditional masculinity ideologies, and impersonal sex: Selection and socialization effects. *Psychology of Men & Masculinities*, *21*(1), 58–68. https://doi.org/10.1037/men0000209