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# Between Supportive and Equal Parenting: Exploring Middle-Class Fathering in Romania Today

**Anca Dohotariu [1], Réka Geambașu [2,3], and Cristina Rat [2]**

[1] Faculty of Political Science, University of Bucharest, Romania
[2] Faculty of Sociology and Social Work, Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania
[3] ELTE CERS Budapest, Hungary

**Correspondence:** Réka Geambașu (reka.geambasu@ubbcluj.ro)

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## Abstract

The profound restructuring that Romania underwent in the last decades of post-socialist transformations and EU accession and membership has brought along changes in family life, including fathers' involvement in parental responsibilities. Today, family arrangements incorporate gender equality values but also opposition to them, alongside an uneven revival of certain conservative norms. Drawing upon a relational approach that analyses the interplay between parental care as a process and gender equality, our research aims to capture the performative, "alive," and constantly transforming features of fathering. We focus on the experiences of middle-class fathers with preschool-age children and their narratives about parental care for infants, balancing ideals of "involved fatherhood" with the everyday actions of involved fathering. To this end, we conducted 41 in-depth qualitative interviews with highly educated, cisgender, and ethnically diverse urbanite fathers who raise their children together with their partners. Our findings confirm that middle-class fathers' involvement is shaped by employment and workplace arrangements, as well as by mothers' attitudes and the concrete needs of the infant. By looking at fathering as performative, i.e., at "doing" fathering, we could see it as constantly shifting along a continuum of noninvolvement–involvement–disinvolvement–reinvolvement. However, our inquiry highlights that "involved fathering" does not necessarily overlap with "equal parenting." Overall, we identified a pattern in fathers' narratives that portrays them as "supportive," as protecting the mother-child bond, at least during the first months of the infants' lives. When this occurs, conjugal partners become solely parents with asymmetric parental responsibilities.

## Keywords

child care; class; family; gender equality; involved fathering; parental responsibilities; Romania

## 1. Introduction

In recent decades, numerous studies have focused on fathers' involvement in child care and other family-related responsibilities. These publications emerge from different disciplines, including care, family, and gender studies, social psychology, welfare, and social policy research (Pustułka & Sikorska, 2023; Sikorska, 2016; Sztáray Kézdy & Drjenovszky, 2021; Takács, 2020), and approach involved fatherhood from different angles of investigation, such as paid and unpaid work, caring masculinities, kinship, child development, and social policy provisions (Grau-Grau et al., 2022). Many scholars see fatherhood and fathering transformations in liberal capitalist societies as part of a broader "incomplete gender revolution," as the overall increase in women's paid employment has not translated into similar levels of men's involvement in household and family obligations (Akácsos & Geambașu, 2024; Daly, 2020; Doucet, 2017; Geambașu, 2024; Hochschild & Machung, 2012; Oechsle et al., 2012; Takács, 2020). Conversely, significant changes in attitudes and cultural meanings related to fathering expose the contrast between engaged fathering and hegemonic masculinity, which underscores men's primary role as breadwinners and providers, often to the detriment of their parental involvement (Hobson, 2014; O'Brien & Wall, 2017; Oechsle et al., 2012).

How do these processes unfold in post-socialist countries characterised by a mixture of social continuities and changes, with a high participation of women in the labour market and the enduring habitus of traditional families (Dumănescu, 2012; Fodor et al., 2002; Kligman, 1998)? What are their aspirations and practices regarding involved fathering? This article examines the nexus between parental care and gender equality within families in post-socialist Romania. Drawing on a relational approach (Doucet, 2006, 2014, 2015; Tronto, 2013), it consists of a qualitative inquiry that examines the narratives of middle-class, ethnically diverse, heterosexual fathers regarding their parental responsibilities and child care-related activities. It offers one of the first analyses aiming to reveal the interplay between transformative fathering and fluid family (in)equalities, as observed in Romania today.

During and after its accession to the European Union, Romania has experienced a mixture of continuities and reforms visible at various societal levels, either normative (legal and political), organisational, or at the level of social practices. As family policies received less political attention in Romania than in other post-socialist countries, the country adopted European recommendations more smoothly, albeit with some delays. The 2019/1158 EU Directive on life-work balance (European Union, 2019) was transposed in the national legislation only in August 2022, expanding paternity leaves and adding a second month to the "daddy quota" of paid child care (parental) leave, in place since 2015. Still, these generous earnings-related benefits translate into a "gendering" of family policies, with asymmetric effects on parenting (Dohotariu, 2018; Hašková & Saxonberg, 2016; Saxonberg, 2014). The combination of short but well-paid paternity leave and considerably longer, non-parent-specific child care leave is widespread among EU countries, including CEE countries (Albrecht et al., 2017, p. 49). Typically, mothers have been using the long child care leave, and the introduction of the other parent's share was hardly a game-changer. In policy terms, in Romania, paid maternity leave has been integrated into the social insurance system since the early 20th century, while paternity leave emerged only in 1999, offering five days of paid leave at the standard replacement rate of the insurance system (approx. 85%), paid by the employer. An additional ten days were granted to those who obtained a "puericulture" certificate, but only once. Following the national transposition of the 2019/1158 EU Directive on work–life balance in 2022, the period of leave was extended to ten days and the benefit was upgraded to the value of one's salary. The new law offered only an extra five days for the

puericulture certificate, but for each child. Paid child care leave is covered from the social protection budget, and since 2015, a compulsory one month is included for "the other" parent, usually the father, increased to two months in 2022, following the same EU Directive. The replacement rate of the benefit is 85% of one's salary, and parents cannot take the leave simultaneously. Early return to work has been compensated since 2005 with a monthly financial stimulus, gradually upgraded and extended since then.

Overall, the Romanian post-socialist welfare regime appears to adhere to a "gender sameness" understanding of equality, similar to other CEE countries (Daly, 2020, p. 40). Additionally, although there is official interest in the current transformations and diversification of family relationships, primarily driven by demographic concerns, the hegemonic political discourse glorifies the importance of the "traditional Romanian family," as opposed to the family institution aligned with gender equality and other democratic values (Băluță & Tufiș, 2023; Zaharijević et al., 2023). In this context, Romanian women are no exception to experiencing the historical "gender yo-yo effect," being dragged back and forth between paid work and family commitments (Takács, 2020, p. 488). More precisely, women continue to bear a double burden and shape their identities in relation to the ideal of motherhood as an accomplishment of femininity, but set the standards of motherhood much higher than the previous generations: "Intensive mothering" has become the norm (Nagy et al., 2023). Conversely, the social construction of masculinity remains centred on the same traditional patriarchal importance of male breadwinning, but takes on new cultural meanings and practices related to caring masculinities and involved fathering (Oláh & Fratczak, 2013; Takács, 2013). Tellingly, a 2018 comparative study on caring fathers in Europe revealed that Romanian fathers were the least likely to make costly work adjustments to embrace caring roles at home (Martínez-Pastor et al., 2024). In the same vein, the 2018 Romanian Gender Barometer (the latest available as of August 2025) reports that only 32.8% of respondents agreed with the statement that "men can raise children just as well as women," with no statistically significant differences between female and male respondents (Grünberg, 2019, pp. 20, 61).

At the same time, Romania underwent significant diversification in family structures and gendered family relationships, including those related to parenthood and parenting experiences. Although representative of a rather "silent revolution" that began before the fall of state socialism and continued after 1990 (Dohotariu, 2015; Mureșan, 2008), changing family constellations include a growing involvement of fathers in early child care, education, and other parental concerns. Today, family arrangements reveal a seemingly paradoxical mixture of changes and resistance to change. A revival of conservative norms and various forms of opposition to gender equality coexist with the dual carer–dual earner model and the ideal of shared family responsibilities. These dynamics are also intricately intertwined with supranational crises, including the recent Covid-19 pandemic (Oates-Indruchová et al., 2024) and the ongoing war in Ukraine, which boosted military expenditures at the detriment of welfare spending. The existing body of scholarship has long described the trends in family dynamics in Romania in recent decades, occasionally also referring to the seemingly paradoxical contradictions between the persistence of conservative attitudes and values and changes driven by gender equality (Bădescu et al., 2007; Kravchenko & Robilă, 2015). Nevertheless, only a few studies provided convincing explanations. Notably, in 2015, Kovács reminded us that during the 1990s and 2000s, Romanians generally considered fathers as essential contributors to children's upbringing, particularly those from urban areas and those who were highly educated, as "the most egalitarian" regarding child-rearing responsibilities (Kovács, 2015, p. 280). The 2018 Gender Barometer revealed that university education increased the likelihood of sharing more gender egalitarian views on the distribution of domestic tasks and provider roles for the family (Grünberg, 2019, pp. 68–69). Also, some scholars examined the

construction of cultural meanings of masculinities through the lens of "dadfluencing" in the context of spreading anti-gender discourse and campaigns (Neaga & Ștefan, 2021). Others conducted top-down analyses on how family policy instruments can influence parental arrangements regarding child care (Kovács, 2018, p. 28) or examined parental involvement in Romania, focusing on the still underexplored gender dimension in domestic settings (Ion et al., 2025, p. 110).

Considering all these, our article presents a qualitative analysis that aims to provide an in-depth examination of middle-class, ethnically diverse, heterosexual, cisgender fathers' involvement in early child care in Romania. Drawing from a relational approach (Doucet, 2006, 2015; Tronto, 2013), we avoid the trap of measuring transformative "ontological realities" that, in fact, are not measurable. Instead, our innovative fieldwork explores how fathers engage in child care or simply slide down towards "disinvolved" fathering, and the interplay between fathers' parental responsibilities and intra-household gender (in)equalities. Our micro-level analysis aims to capture the performative, "alive," and constantly transforming features of fathering, in line with the idea of "doing parenting" and "doing gender" (Allen, 2021; Orloff & Laperrière, 2021). However, we concentrate on the early stages of fathering, starting with pregnancy and continuing through the months after childbirth. This choice aligns with Doucet's argument that this early parenting period is characterised by the amplification of biological and social differences between mothers and fathers, which can take on significant disproportions due to enduring gendered disparities in parenting and employment strategies (Doucet, 2009, p. 93). Therefore, our analysis centres on specific infant care experiences. By doing this, we seek to uncover fathers' interests, motivations, choices, expectations, and desires for more active involvement in child care, or the absence of it, and intra-couple negotiations, tensions, and discrepancies among the various meanings of "involved fatherhood" and the tangible manifestations of "fathering," all of which emerge from our interviewees' narratives.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

The differentiation between "fatherhood" and "fathering" does not seem to be of vital importance to most scholars. Still, their understandings do not entirely overlap, which calls for some clarification. For example, Kravchenko and Robilă (2015, p. 109) refer to fatherhood as related to masculinity norms, parenthood, or kinship, including fathers' legal rights and obligations towards their descendants, as well as paternal involvement in children's well-being. In contrast, they assign fathering to the day-to-day participation of fathers in routine care. Other scholars introduce the notion of "fatherliness," without, however, opposing it to fatherhood. Instead, these authors emphasise the discrepancy between the traditional fatherhood model, interpreted as related to hegemonic masculinity and strongly focused on full-time paid work and provider duties, and the various newly developed forms of modern "fatherly involvement." Accordingly, what is truly essential to current changes in parenting is the contemporary societal shift from masculine parental authority to emotional responsiveness, which has recently permeated father-child relationships (Oechsle et al., 2012).

Given the ambiguous nature of the term "involvement" (Dermott, 2003; Takács, 2020, p. 489), the syntagm of "involved fathers" in child care and other family obligations has not developed into a common concept. Nevertheless, scholars generally agree to define it as fathers' simultaneous commitments to paid work and family-related responsibilities at various practical and emotional levels, including "presence, practical care, nurturance and affection" (Machin, 2015, p. 39, as cited in Takács, 2020, p. 488). In this vein, our analysis builds on previously discussed understandings of fathers' involvement in child care, while focusing on "involved

fathering" instead of "fathers' involvement." Our explicit choice of the verb indicates that we do not reduce "fathering" to a mere set of indicators. Instead, we aim to bring to the fore the performative dimension of fathering, focusing specifically on its occurrence, dynamics, and transformations as an active process of care (Allen, 2021, pp. 45–50; Tronto, 2013, p. 22).

Our analysis relies on a relational sociological approach, situated at the intersection of various disciplines such as family studies, care studies, and gender research, and which conceives family relations as gendered and socially instituted by definition, i.e., "relational ontologies" imbued with frameworks of dynamic, processual, "alive" and constantly changing meanings and expectations (Doucet, 2017; Kremer, 2007; Tronto, 2013). In line with this theoretical framework, analysing the nexus between parental care and gender equality within families entails a two-fold conceptual background. Our article draws on Doucet's perspective on gendered parental responsibilities (Doucet, 2006, 2014, 2015), which we correlate with Verloo and Lombardo's (2007) explanations of gender equality understood as sameness, difference, or transformation.

Inspired by extensive scholarship on parenting grounded in symbolic interactionism, with phenomenological roots, Doucet (2015, p. 231) conceptualises parental responsibilities as a threefold set of entangled emotional, community, and moral responsibilities that are gendered, fluid, temporal, relational, and inseparable from the context in which they occur. Doucet (2015, p. 226) claims further:

> I argue for a conception of (gendered parental caregiving) responsibility that is constituted by movement, fluidity, flux, negotiation, subjective interpretations of what these mean, and how these responsibilities unfold within households and between households and social institutions across time.

Hence, Doucet's approach enables us to examine involved fathering not merely as a dyadic exchange between entirely autonomous family members, but as a social relationship that develops through various meanings, bonding, and embodied experiences. However, unlike Doucet, who states that there are parenting situations in which gendered embodiment does not necessarily make a difference in child care (Doucet, 2009), we align our inquiry closer to the idea that gendered bodies always matter (Gabb, 2012). Also, Doucet's conceptual framework highlights the historicity and cultural specificity of gender equality as a concept, as well as its various meanings, including difference, sameness, and transformation (Doucet, 2015; Verloo & Lombardo, 2007). More precisely, gender equality as difference has long legitimised the "fusion" ideal of a parental couple into one single entity: "*comment*, *avec deux*, *ne faire qu'un*" ("how the two shall become one flesh"; see Théry, 1999). From our perspective, this view entails an analysis of mothering and fathering based on binary male/female differentiation, rooted primarily in individuals' biological characteristics that assign them to the traditional gender order. In turn, gender equality as sameness aligns with "gender neutrality," which has been developed through legal principles and norms. This means that parents can be treated as if they were interchangeable at any time, while implicitly ignoring that mothers and fathers are not abstract principles, but embodied human beings. Finally, envisioning gender equality as transformation or displacement (Orloff & Laperrière, 2021; Verloo & Lombardo, 2007) paves the way for replacing the fixity of certain gender understandings with more fluid conceptions: Rather than "being" parents, both fathers and mothers are constantly engaged in an ongoing process of "doing" or "performing" embodied gendered parenting. Overall, considering these different visions of gender equality, Doucet's work is especially valuable for our analysis, as it helps us address the mainstream sameness/difference dilemma prevalent in gender, family, social policy, and parenting literature.

In line with the framework of gendered caregiving parental responsibilities that defines fathering as a "love labour" that cannot be quantified or commodified but can be recognised in parents' narratives (Doucet, 2015), our micro-level inquiry explores fathers' narratives of practices and meanings of involved fathering and their interplay with gender equality in today's Romanian context. Our analysis contributes to the field by providing an angle of investigation that has not been explored in previous research.

## 3. Methods and Sample

We embrace a qualitative approach aimed at exploring middle-class fathers' narratives about how they have experienced their involvement in child care for their infants and toddlers, and how relations with their partners, i.e., the mothers, have changed and reshaped throughout that period. Our purpose is to reveal how fathers define what it means and what it takes to be an "involved father," and how they recall enacting "involved fathering" as a social practice in their everyday life. Observing in situ these everyday practices and/or confronting them with mothers' narratives would certainly be highly interesting, but it falls outside the frame of this article. We did not aim to obtain accurate descriptions of child care practices validated by mothers or other persons closely connected to the family, but rather to gather detailed subjective narratives conveyed by the fathers.

We narrowed our focus to middle-class fathers living in larger cities and their metropolitan areas, as they represent the category most likely to share more progressive views on gender roles and (gendered) practices within the family (Kovács, 2015, p. 280). Their jobs are also more likely to allow flexible time arrangements that enable them to take up child care responsibilities, especially when they can work remotely from home. Furthermore, previous studies revealed that middle-class fathers get involved in child care and early education with the aim of ensuring the social reproduction of a relatively privileged position or upward social mobility for their children (Vincent & Ball, 2007). We used the term "middle-class" as a widely recognised label for highly educated non-manual employees or self-employed individuals working in professional or managerial jobs characterised by relative autonomy and control over the labour process, secure employment, access to social insurance, and incomes above the national average. In Romania, as elsewhere in CEE, this category is concentrated mainly in big cities, and they largely share a trajectory of upward social mobility from working-class parents and territorial mobility from smaller cities and rural areas occasioned by their university studies (Pop, 2016). We opted to include only respondents living in large cities, given the greater availability of crèches and kindergartens, and the relative diversity of public and private child care services, which facilitate the renegotiation of gendered parental roles.

We regarded middle-class fathers as a heterogeneous category, diverse along the lines of profession and field of study (from social sciences to computing and engineering), as well as in terms of ethnicity, religion, cultural practices, and individual trajectories of social mobility. Our conversations took into account these forms of identity and belonging. However, it was hardly possible to construct a purposive sample based on all these categories. Consequently, we used the following criteria to build our purposive (theoretical) sample of fathers: tertiary education, residence in larger cities or their metropolitan areas, stable income around or above the national average, ethnicity (to ensure diversity in terms of the historical ethnic groups of Romania), and raising at least one child below the age of five in a heterosexual couple. Our fieldwork includes 41 interviews, with two conducted on-site and 39 conducted online, between December 2024 and March 2025. All interviewees have completed university education, and their occupations range from freelance

artists to journalists, project coordinators in NGOs, sociologists, educational experts, IT specialists, professional firefighters, and military officers. Most of them have only one child, while the remainder have two children. Altogether, only two respondents have children from previous relationships, and two of them were expecting a child at the time of the interview. In terms of ethnicity, our sample includes 16 Romanians, 13 Hungarians from Transylvania, eight Roma, three Romanians who moved from the Republic of Moldova, and one Lipovean Russian. All of them have Romanian citizenship, and except for the three respondents born and raised in the Republic of Moldova, all have spent their childhood in Romania. We decided to limit our research to the relatively similar cultural milieus of the largest historical ethnic groups in Romania, and withdrew the initial ambition to also include migrants from outside Europe, due to inherent boundaries of an exploratory research article. Most of our respondents are between 30 and 40 years old, with two outlier cases of young fathers who just turned 26 and 28, respectively, and five fathers between the ages of 45 and 48. The majority belong to the historical Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant (Reformed) churches, but only a handful of them are religious and practising. All of them are living in large cities, mostly Bucharest and Cluj, but we also had respondents from Brașov, Călărași, Oradea, Pitești, Târgoviște, and Târgu Mureș.

The limited scope of this article did not allow us to expand our research to the cases of single fathers, homosexual couples, or other types of families. In-depth interviews were conducted by the three authors and a graduate student, primarily online and occasionally on-site. We paid particular attention to parental and conjugal relationships, and their evolution over time, as these emerged from each narrative. Holding the interviews online had the advantage of allowing for more natural recording and for reaching out to respondents from all over the country, while also accommodating considerably tighter schedules. However, it had the drawback that, on a few occasions, their partner and/or their children entered the room, and we had to put the conversation on hold for a brief intermission. Our questions focused on children's first three years of life; when there were two or more children in the family, we asked fathers to speak about their youngest child. All respondents were eager to discuss their experiences, and they shared the view that fathers' involvement in child care is much less discussed than what is actually needed.

In interpreting our findings, we used detailed reading and thematic coding to select and organise relevant interview fragments (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We complemented thematic analysis with narrative analysis of "how people make sense of what happened…and to what effect" (Bryman, 2016, p. 589). Still, two main issues should be considered. First, for many of our interviewees, the birth of the child and the first time spent with the child occurred while the restrictions of the Covid-19 pandemic were in place. This limited couples' possibilities to outsource infant care and child care to extended family (in particular grandmothers) or babysitters, but also provided the possibility for fathers to work from home. Second, all four interviewers were women, which may have led to social desirability effects when asking men about their fathering experiences.

## 4. Findings

The results of the analysis are structured around several themes from our qualitative fieldwork: the cultural meanings associated with "involved fathering," including how interviewees refer to their own fathers, and their narratives about key moments in their own fathering experiences, such as those related to pregnancy, childbirth, and the early stages of infant care. For this article, we focus on the initial stages of fathering, aiming to analyse how the performative process of involved fathering occurs and transforms within our interviewees' experiences. Additionally, we aim to explore the interplay between involved fathering and equal parenting as

it emerges from our interviews with middle-class Romanian fathers. Although we invited them to share "the story" of their fathering, all recordings include references to the stages that we address in this article. Moreover, it is worth mentioning that many interviewees shared their enthusiasm for discussing their "involved fathering" experiences, either because they are passionate about the topic and could talk for hours about their children, or because they believe that fathers' voices are not listened to enough today. One father spontaneously stated that although the "newest" generations include dads who are significantly more involved in child care than previous ones, people rarely pay attention to their experiences, and their voices often remain unheard.

### *4.1. Cultural Meanings of Involved Fathering*

One aim of our field research was to identify the cultural meanings associated with "involved fathering," either through direct questions or as they implicitly emerged from our interviewees' narratives. The direct questions elicited a variety of responses that generally fit into two categories. First, when referring to the father-child relationship, interviewees considered being "involved" to mean, above all, being available in terms of time, attentiveness, and responsiveness, and making the choice to "prioritize" the child over other responsibilities and to build a relationship with them: "It is pointless to be physically present if you are not giving the child the attention they need" (military, 33). Beyond presence, fathers' involvement also means "thinking about the child, even when you are not there" (corporate, 35), which recalls the emotional and moral responsibilities conceptualised by Doucet (2015). More importantly, one father emphasised that the child is not merely an amorphous care receiver (as usually referred to in most analyses on child care), but a constantly evolving human being who actively contributes in various ways to the father-child relationship, even when not verbally articulated (journalist, 39). Overall, the father-child relationship not only legitimises fathers' involvement in child care, but it also questions the social definition of masculinity:

> At least among my friends, there is no longer that stereotype that the mother has to do most of the work, and the father's role is more of a nanny. Being an involved father has become normal lately. It is no longer a joke topic and an attack on masculinity. No, there is no one to laugh at fathers who walk their child in a stroller. I mean, it's also about building a relationship with your child. (corporate, 35)

Second, interviewees ascribe "involved fathering" to a holistic perception of family life regarded as a unit that relies on the father's responsibility to provide for his family's well-being and safety: "There is no child care or education without a roof on top and on an empty stomach!" (IT specialist, corporate, 37). A prevalent tendency among our interviewees was to define "involved fathering" as the support they provide to their partner, who is often seen as the primary caregiver. In their view, "involved fathering" means being ready and available to take over any material requirements concerning the infant and to support mothers' needs of any kind, and, most of all, their decisions regarding the child. Still, our qualitative data includes one outlier narrative that suggests an understanding of equal parenting as sameness or interchangeability. In this father's view, "involved fathering" is still configured in relation to the mother's role, and yet, the father's involvement is not only limited to being supportive, but it is the ability to substitute for the mother at any time and in any possible task. Overall, all interviewees refer to involved fathering as something positive and desirable: "There is no father who would label himself as a "non-involved" father in child care" (gambling expert, 37).

Our fieldwork reveals various situations concerning how fathers describe their own dad's family-related and caring roles. Some of the interviewees declare that they proudly reproduced their paternal model: "I raise my

son just like my dad used to raise me" (military, 33). Others contest it: "My father was so overwhelmingly protective and controlling, which I hope I am not" (IT specialist, private company, 36). Some simply acknowledge it: "My father's main responsibility was related to the shopping lists that my mother gave him; he was never directly involved in other child care tasks. But this was not abnormal. I love both my parents, just like they were" (corporate, 35). Still others cannot compare with their fathers, who worked abroad for undetermined periods of time, were responsible for financially supporting their children, but left them at home in their grandmother's care (sales officer, 32). Nevertheless, some interviewees refer to generational differences in parenting, especially those who choose to keep their parents out of the process of raising and caring for their grandchildren. Not only do they evoke the differences between "demanding" and "entertaining" grandpas, who either fail or succeed in bonding with their grandchildren, respectively, but they also refer to "old" ways of raising children, more rigid and normatively framed, as opposed to current parenting methods. In their view, the latter are more "open" and centred on the child's sensorial and cognitive development at each stage of their lives. More importantly, interviewees emphasise the importance of the societal context, which, in their views, makes a significant difference in parenting from one generation to the next. This idea aligns with the relational approach, which suggests that "action (i.e., what parents do) is not only rational, but also relational, and *done in context*" (Kremer, 2007, p. 76, emphasis added). According to some narratives, mothers generally want to return to paid employment, sooner or later, after having a child. Thus, equal parenting occurs not necessarily because it is a highly desirable "new" cosmopolitan generational ideal, but because it takes place within a context where each parent has specific professional commitments, leading them to support each other in care-related tasks as well.

### *4.2. Fathers' Narratives on Pregnancy and Childbirth*

One of the initial distinctions between fathering and mothering, derived from our fieldwork, pertains to the issue of "maternal instinct." Some fathers spontaneously mentioned it as an uncontested "given" that can explain differences in parental tactics and involvement, while others declared that they "learned how to listen to it and how to accept it as it is, for the best interest of the child" (IT specialist, private company, 36). Either way, some fathers explain that mothers are always better at "feeling" the needs of the cared-for, simply because they spend more time with their babies. Others invoke common naturalist arguments related to women's bodies, which change throughout pregnancy:

> When a birth occurs, women are flooded with a hormone cocktail that helps them incredibly. In our case, I was amazed to see my wife manage without sleep the baby's first month. Meanwhile, the mere five hours of sleep I got made me stumble around the house like a zombie, while she could have easily run a marathon if she wanted to. It was undoubtedly the hormone cocktail that helped her get through that. (IT specialist, corporate, 37)

We did not encounter narratives that explicitly challenged the biological division between "men and women," which remained a referential framework for the social construction of gender. For some interviewees, "genetic," "hormonal," and "neuronal" factors related to women's bodies explain that "there is an extra bond between the mother and the child" (NGO worker, 38). Others consider that this "bond" is formed during pregnancy and lingers on after childbirth.

Pregnancy also renders the biological differences between heterosexual partners into a perceived "undeniable certainty." Interviewees recall that during pregnancy, not only did their partners' condition change, but their own experience shifted from being exclusively conjugal partners to a sui generis fatherly role, even at this early stage of becoming a father. In this regard, our fieldwork reveals two main tendencies that do not necessarily exclude each other. First, some fathers decided to read and gather all necessary information about the evolution of the foetus and women's bodily transformations during pregnancy and then use this knowledge to ease their partners' experiences and help them more effectively, but also to bond with the newborn. These fathers described their need to connect with the baby starting in the very initial stages of pregnancy, through physical touch on the mother's belly to better feel the foetus's movements, or through reading stories, singing, or talking: "The very first minutes when I saw my new-born daughter, I could clearly confirm the bond between us" (sociologist, 47). Many interviewees also attended all medical check-ups and foetal monitoring during pregnancy, and they highlight their personal reactions to the foetus's evolution:

> Baby monitoring during pregnancy was the biggest stress of my life. I've never experienced anything more shocking than this, I mean, the emotions I had when I saw the baby for the first time at the ultrasound…and when I was about to find out if it had two hands, two legs, if its eyes were well placed…or the infinite days when I had to wait for the results of medical tests. I have never been happier than in the moments when the doctor told me that there was absolutely nothing wrong with the foetus. But from the day of the test until we went to the hospital to see the results, my knees were weakening meter by meter. (IT specialist, self-employed, 32)

Second, our interviews reveal that the pregnancy stage is also referential for a significant transformation in the process of fathering, namely, the conversion from being a conjugal partner to becoming a helper. In this way, fathers do not participate in pregnancy as partners, since they feel they cannot fully share it equally with the mothers. Instead, pregnancy is, in their view, the very first instance when they develop their supportive role and embrace a holistic approach that encompasses the mother-foetus entity, perceived as inseparable. For instance, two cases are particularly eloquent. One father recalls his "natural" need to "take more care" of his pregnant partner, to "love her even more," to take on the "nesting" responsibility (i.e., to renovate, clean, and prepare a welcoming home for the upcoming baby)—all in all, to create "a protective balloon" surrounding his pregnant wife, to offer her "everything she needed," and "even to isolate and shield her" from the potentially dangerous "outside world," while facing by himself all the "external difficulties that hit him in the face," such as financial issues or any other surrounding problems: "During pregnancy, I didn't choose anything. All the choices were always hers. I was not there to make decisions, but only to support hers. And I simply listened to the mother and did whatever she needed me to do" (artist, 31). In the same vein, our second example reinforces the idea of a process in which, starting from possibly equal conjugal partners before pregnancy, fathers become "supportive parents," whose responsibility is to address and take care of the mother-child relationship:

> I learned that I need to take care of the mother because this includes caring for the child. I mean, the mother is primarily responsible for the child, which is fine, and that doesn't mean the father doesn't need to get involved too; however, his focus must be on the mother and, indirectly, the child. (sociologist, 47)

Nevertheless, the interviewee emphasised that this process comes at a cost that fathers must deal with. More precisely, he explained that, during pregnancy, a woman undergoes a complete transformation

physically, mentally, and emotionally, and the partner she was before "disappears" and turns into someone else—a mother. At the same time, the father-to-be also experiences changes, but "nobody mentions" his transformation, even though it may bring about significant frustrations and costs: "From a partner to share your life with, you become the one who executes, the one who feels like they are sacrificing a lot, the one who often feels like they no longer matter, and no longer exist" (sociologist, 47). In other words, being "supportive" could be "pure joy" sometimes, but it could likewise be a "duty," as well as a source of intra-couple tensions and frictions, especially when domestic tasks are too demanding or the father simply fails to act as the mother expects him to. Overall, pregnancy is a referential stage for the dynamics of gendered parenting, which builds on embodied gendered asymmetries between the father and his partner.

In most cases, our interviewees declare that all details related to childbirth, such as the location or medical facility, and the procedure, were entirely the mother's choice, which reminds us of the feminist principle "her body, her choice." However, regarding fathers' participation in childbirth, public hospitals do not provide this opportunity; only private clinics do. This creates an immediate gap between parents who can afford private medical care and those who cannot, which is worth mentioning, although our sample does not address this issue, since it includes only financially better-off fathers. Many interviewees recall that, regardless of their personal options, during the Covid-19 pandemic, restrictions were very strict, and they were not even allowed to enter the clinics. All they could do was wait for the mother and the newborn to be discharged so they could take them home. Apart from the pandemic restrictions, our sample includes both fathers who did not participate in childbirth and those who did. In the first case, fathers refer to their partners' decision to exclude them from that particular experience. For instance, one father recalled that: "We talked about it and she told me she didn't want me to see her during childbirth; not only is she a strong person, but she is too proud for that" (sociologist, 47). In the same vein, another father declared that:

> Childbirth is something that solely belongs to the mother and the child. She didn't want me to see her that way, and neither did I. In my view, fathers who do that are so selfish; they are intruders who are there just for themselves, and not for their partners. (IT specialist, corporate, 37)

In the other case, our sample comprises situations when fathers were allowed to be present during childbirth, including natural births and C-sections, with the latter being notably more common in Romania than in many other European countries (Slovenski et al., 2024). For example, one father decided to record the C-section procedure performed by "a female doctor with whom I planned the war, and we won the war! [laughs]" (military, 33). Not only does his profession explain the fortitude to be part of such moments, but he had planned to be there, to offer his partner psychological support, out of curiosity, as well as out of pride: "It was my first newborn son, I wanted to see him stepping into this world, and to be there for him" (military, 33). While he stated that every father should make his own decision, another interviewee suggests that all fathers should participate in childbirth if they have the option:

> Childbirth is a real torment. I saw it with my own eyes, and there is no more important support for the mother than being there by her side. As long as both parents decide to have a baby, then the father should always be there for her, with no exception. (marketing & sales officer, 32)

Overall, contrary to the ideal that parents should experience childbirth as partners, because of parents' asymmetrical biological participation in childbirth, our interviewees see it more as a turning point when

fathers' role is, once again, to "support" and "protect" their partners, as long as they are able and allowed to do so.

### *4.3. Fathering During the Early Stages of Infant Care*

In line with previous research, our fieldwork confirms that parents' decisions to share parental responsibilities change from one stage of child development to another, involving various commitments and activities that range from infant care to toddler care. Still, most fathers declared that they were not aware of any normative division of parental involvement, such as "à priori, fathers have to do this, and mothers have to do that," which slightly contradicts their taken-for-granted convictions about "maternal instinct" and the mother-baby bond and underscores the fluidity of such "convictions." Regarding infant care, our interviewees stated that they did not refrain from any hands-on care tasks concerning the baby, such as feeding, changing diapers, cleaning, bathing, or putting the baby to sleep.

Breastfeeding, widely regarded as the most "natural" and beneficial way to nourish newborns and infants, is a central tenet of intensive motherhood, which new mothers most frequently align with (Faircloth, 2013). Whether or not they have consulted parenting literature, partners of middle-class women are aware of these norms and tend to adopt a supportive stance toward breastfeeding. This exclusive role of mothers in early infant feeding, however, can inadvertently become a barrier for fathers who are eager to take an active role in their babies' lives. In our sample, no father complained of "unjust" physical differences that prevented them from engaging in activities that only mothers can do (Doucet, 2006, 2017). Still, whenever mothers were unable to breastfeed the baby, or could do it only partially, some fathers were happy to "reframe" the situation and take over bottle-feeding the infant. While fathers expressed disappointment at not fulfilling this hallmark of "natural" and responsive parenting, these situations sometimes opened up new opportunities for involved fathering. They described these moments as pivotal in deepening their bond with their child and making it somewhat easier for mothers. As one father recounted:

> Well, it was bad that she struggled with breastfeeding, but from another point of view, it was good that it allowed me to feed him. It was extremely funny to "finger feed" him: you know, the technique where you attach a small tube to your finger and use it to give formula. It was extraordinary to feel how strongly such a tiny baby could suckle. So, I guess I can count that as an advantage. (freelance artist, 37)

Overall, our fieldwork includes two examples that are particularly relevant to the process of fathering along the axis of noninvolvement–involvement–disinvolvement–reinvolvement and its interplay with equal parenting. First, our sample includes the case of a father with a traumatic family event. His wife's first pregnancy with twins resulted in only one of the premature babies surviving. Because it happened during the pandemic, only after insistence was the mother given an exemption to leave the hospital to bury her baby, taking the risk of not being able to return to the hospital to be there for the other twin, born much too early. Later on, another pregnancy occurred unplanned, and, contrary to all medical expectations, it resulted in a healthy newborn at term. On the one hand, the father's narrative reveals that he perceived himself in an asymmetrical situation compared to his partner's, thus assuming a rather supportive role. Although directly affected by their loss, the father underscored that:

> I was deeply affected, but not as much as my wife was. She bore all the weight on her shoulders; she carried both those babies inside her, and I can't even find the words to describe how she survived those moments. I can only imagine what it must have been like for her. (engineer, 32)

On the other hand, during the second pregnancy, the father became the stay-at-home primary caregiver for the entire family—i.e., the pregnant mother forced to rest in bed, and also their toddler.

> Starting from the first months of pregnancy, I didn't go to the office at all. I just stayed home and worked from home, as much as I could. And I took care of everything that could be done around the house. She had to have total bed rest. She wasn't allowed to get out of bed except to go to the toilet, which meant I had to take care of everything. For Junior, I had to entertain him, do activities with him, pay him all the attention he needed, play with him, keep him on my head, and spin him around. To do everything for him, on top of all the other things, such as the food, the cleaning, and absolutely everything! It was vital to be at home with my pregnant wife, to bring her food to bed, bring her a glass of water, give her pills, and take her to the hospital in case of emergency….And I lived like that on constant alert for five or six months, when everything was on my shoulders. Don't get me wrong, I'm not complaining, I'm just telling you how it was, you know? I was also fortunate enough to benefit from support on the job side. Anyways, I would have quit the job otherwise. (engineer, 32)

Second, our sample includes an example of how initially planned involved fathering can turn into disinvolved fathering, at least for some stages of the child's life. A self-defined "progressive" and "non-traditionalist" father had planned to be very much involved in raising his one-and-a-half-year-old child at the time of the interview. However, what happened after childbirth was the opposite of his expectations, to the point that he would not be able to explain how exactly he turned into a "dis-involved" father. The infant was exclusively breastfed and therefore slept with his mother, who, from a "twelve-hour-a-day working woman," radically transformed into a "full-time mother." The father recalls that, as time passed, the child's dependence on the mother increased instead of fading away:

> At first, I was there with both of them, but lately, less and less. Contrary to our progressive thoughts, it seems that things have naturally separated, I would say. Life, society, and my situation…all these show that stereotypes about women and men still hold meaning, even though I have been very critical of them, and I still am. I also struggle a lot to divide my time between work and home. The child falls asleep at 9 p.m., I get home later than that, and leave very early the next morning, so there are days when we don't see each other. This hurts a lot, and I try to squeeze out as much time as I can from the office and rush back home, at least to see him and spend a little time together. Somehow, I feel like I missed the first part of his life, when it was so vital for him to have support from both parents, but…at the end of the day, one of us has to work and pay the bills. (activist, 38)

Similar to other narratives, this interview indicates that "involved fathering" is often seen as the amount of time spent with the child. However, this time cannot be planned or measured, and it is experienced differently at each stage of the child's life.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

To conclude, our analysis aligns with previous research on several key aspects. First, our fieldwork confirms that middle-class involved fathering is shaped by a series of factors, including: (a) personal paid work arrangements and obligations, i.e., fathers with a flexible schedule or who work remotely were more readily available when help was needed; (b) fathers' perception of mothers' attitudes, demands, and willingness to ask for or accept father's involvement in care tasks; and, even more importantly, (c) the needs of the infant, especially in the cases of children with disabilities or with complex medical needs. Second, our findings support the idea of a dynamic and asynchronous gap between cultural meanings and social practices concerning fathering, which, as part of their societal context, may mutually reinforce as well as contradict each other: "social practices may lag behind the images that are propagated, but they may also undergo change" (Oechsle et al., 2012, p. 13). In this vein, our interviews suggest that the socially desirable image of "involved fatherhood" does not entirely overlap with the concrete enactment of involved fathering. Third, our analysis is consistent with the scholarship on gender equality in domestic life that differentiates between housework and child care as conceptually and methodologically distinct (Doucet, 2017, pp. 13–14). Our interviewees' involvement in child care also significantly differs from their responsibilities in household chores (such as cleaning, cooking, grocery shopping, laundry, etc.). Fourth, our analysis aligns with previous research that problematises fathering as a learning process, through which fathers actively engage in socially instituted (family) relationships and search for informational content that they consider accurate. Therefore, fathers do not simply follow a clearly defined set of instructions for proper fathering. Instead, from a relational perspective, men become fathers and constantly learn how to do fathering through dynamic, interactive information gathering and lived experiences.

At the same time, our work diverges from most research that mainly focuses on "caring masculinities" and "intimate fathering" to explain current changes in fathers' involvement in child care across different contexts (Dermott, 2003; Takács, 2020). Instead of trying to identify specific features of the Romanian ideal-typical middle-class "involved father," our analysis adopts a relational perspective (Doucet, 2017; Kremer, 2007; Tronto, 2013) and shows that fathers can be involved in care tasks to various extents, from occasional help to full-time availability. This highlights the genuinely performative nature of "doing" fathering, which constantly shifts along the continuum of noninvolvement–involvement–disinvolvement–reinvolvement, as a fluid process that is difficult to quantify. Moreover, "equal parenting" as a process cannot be defined by a measurable "equal" distribution of child care tasks, which explains why "involved fathering" does not necessarily overlap with "equal parenting."

Overall, our fieldwork encompasses situations where fathers are highly involved in child care tasks and consistently present in their children's lives. Also, we noticed that the more mothers expect and explicitly ask their partners to get engaged in care activities, the more fathers become involved. Subsequent research on larger samples is needed to validate and further analyse this potential pattern. Concerning "equal parenting," our interviewees' narratives show that, at least regarding infant care, as a rule, mothers hold the cognitive and managerial responsibility of accounting for children's needs and ensuring that they are comprehensively and timely addressed. Fathers might assist mothers in making decisions and organising care work, but these are not their prerogatives. This unsurprisingly reinforces gendered, asymmetric parental roles. The managerial burden rests primarily on mothers, even if specific tasks were delegated to and performed by fathers. When comparing fathering to mothering, our interviewees refer to themselves as genuinely

"different" and have an understanding of equality as difference (Verloo & Lombardo, 2007), despite Romanian child care policies promoting equality as sameness. Although it was neither explicitly introduced in our conversations nor spontaneously referred to as a desirable goal, the questioning of "equal" gendered parenting subtly emerged from fathers' repeated mentions of the biological differences between mothers and fathers, as well as their own identification with "masculinity."

From a conceptual perspective, equal parenting cannot be measured, but it can be narrated (Doucet, 2015, p. 233). Also, working with the sameness/difference dichotomy reinforces the idea that denying the gendered differences between fathering and mothering does not pave the way to equality in parenting. Instead, it directly depends on how conjugal partners build their relationship and daily integrate their roles as parents, while supporting each other, sharing responsibilities, and acknowledging each other's voice in a constant dialogue as "different but equals" (Cavell, 2003; Théry, 1998). Analysing empirical findings through this conceptual lens shows that our sample includes some cases of equal parenting, where conjugality and parenting roles neither exclude nor include each other. Nevertheless, in most narrated cases, at least during the first months of the infants' lives, parents' conjugal relationship tends to be completely reduced to or even replaced by the parental relationship. Accordingly, women become completely absorbed in mothering, while fathers retain the option of embracing a "nesting" role. Despite being fully engaged in infant care, these fathers often play a "supportive" role in parenting, particularly with newborns and infants. Similar to Matryoshka dolls, they assume responsibilities that cover the life of the nuclear family, and they look after the mother, who, in turn, fully concentrates on the infant. When this occurs, conjugal partners become solely parents with asymmetric parental responsibilities.

Our analysis has entirely concentrated on the fluidity of the fathering process and its interplay with (un)equal parenting, aiming to capture these within our interviewees' narratives. However, it also has inherent limitations. Building on fathers' narratives, our inquiry neither includes a direct observation of their practices nor a comparison with mothers' narratives. Moreover, the focus on infant care experiences could be expanded to include toddler- and child care-related parental responsibilities. Noteworthy developments could involve greater variation in terms of family structures, such as situations of single fathers, those who raise adopted children, fathers of children from previous relationships, or same-sex fathers. Although not considered in this analysis, our fieldwork contains significant ethnic variation that could be explored in a future intersectional approach, highlighting the intertwined roles of gender, sexual orientation, disability, class, and ethnicity in shaping parental responsibilities. These are just a few examples of potential new research directions that would undoubtedly contribute to a better understanding of the Romanian case, as part of the broader Central and Eastern European context.

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## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

## Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to confidentiality and privacy restrictions in line with the ethical standards of qualitative social research.

## LLMs Disclosure

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## About the Authors

**Anca Dohotariu** is an associate professor in the Faculty of Political Science of the University of Bucharest. Her publications, research interests, and university courses are at the crossroads of disciplines of family studies, care research, social and family policies, public policy analysis, and gender research.

**Réka Geambașu** is a sociologist affiliated with Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj, and ELTE CERS, Budapest. Her research interests include labour inequalities between men and women, the social construction of motherhood, and female entrepreneurship.

**Cristina Rat** is a lecturer in the Faculty of Sociology and Social Work at Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj, where she teaches courses on class inequality and social policies. Her research concerns the relation between welfare states and inequality, with a focus on poverty and social marginalization.