

Parental leave and fathers: extending and deepening the knowledge base

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Introduction

In recent decades, social scientists from numerous disciplines in the Nordic countries and abroad have turned their attention to the study of gender disparities in paid work and, in tandem, gender divisions of labour at home. A second voluminous literature has addressed social policies that facilitate reconciling parenthood and employment – often referred to as ‘family-friendly’ policies. Researchers tackling these policy questions have also come from multiple disciplines, and they have employed diverse analytic methods, both quantitative and qualitative; some have worked from a gender or feminist perspective while others have not.

These two large bodies of scholarship have converged in recent years around the study of leave policies, that is, policies enabling parents to take temporary breaks from paid work – with job protection, remuneration or both – to care for young children. That these groups of scholars are interested in leave is hardly surprising given that leave policies are intended to affect outcomes in both paid and unpaid work, and they are a core component of the work–family reconciliation policy package. It is also not surprising that this literature is heavily cross-national (albeit largely limited to affluent countries), because policy designs vary sharply across countries. Perhaps more remarkable is the recent and sustained swell of research focused squarely – or even exclusively – on leave policies and fathers.

In this brief chapter, I first focus on key conclusions from the existing fathers-and-leave literature – drawing substantially on my own past work. Following that, I highlight the conclusions and lessons emerging from the studies in this innovative volume.

Lessons learned until now

Research on fathers and leave has generally tackled three large, intertwined questions:

1. What leave rights and benefits are actually granted to fathers in the world's affluent countries?
2. What policy features encourage or incentivise fathers to take up the leave and benefits to which they are entitled?
3. To what extent – and where – are leave policy designs the most and least gender-egalitarian?

Several conclusions have emerged from this body of scholarship. First, as scholars have assessed the existing leave provisions for fathers – across countries – they have had to grapple with the fact that these schemes not only vary widely, but that they are also remarkably complex. Leave is often provided to fathers via father-only paternity leave schemes (which are relatively straightforward). In many countries, however, some or all of the leave granted to fathers is embedded in parental leave policies, such policies often being famously complicated. Parental leave schemes typically combine job protection and wage replacement (with durations that may not coincide); they often grant combinations of paid and unpaid time off; and each parent's entitlement may depend on the other parent's eligibility or actual usage. Moreover, leave policies frequently include features allowing flexibility in the timing of take-up (across days, weeks, months or years), and many schemes rely on diverse – and sometimes overlapping – funding streams. Finally, some schemes reserve periods of parental leave specifically for either of the parents, typically the father. Leave reserved specifically for fathers – that is, individual rights to non-transferable periods of leave – are intended to increase male take-up of parental leave, and thus more gender-egalitarian leave outcomes. In this book, these periods of leave are referred to as a 'father's quota'.

That said, fathers' leave entitlements vary markedly across affluent countries. In their 2010 study, Ray, Gornick and Schmitt compared 21 public parental leave schemes on several dimensions, including the generosity of the leave granted to mothers and fathers as of 2009. Obviously, leave generosity can be measured in countless ways. Ray et al captured the total number of weeks available to fathers, in couples, including both paid and unpaid leave. Their indicator – reported in Figure 17.1 below – includes only portions of leave entitlements available for fathers; it excludes any periods that could be taken by

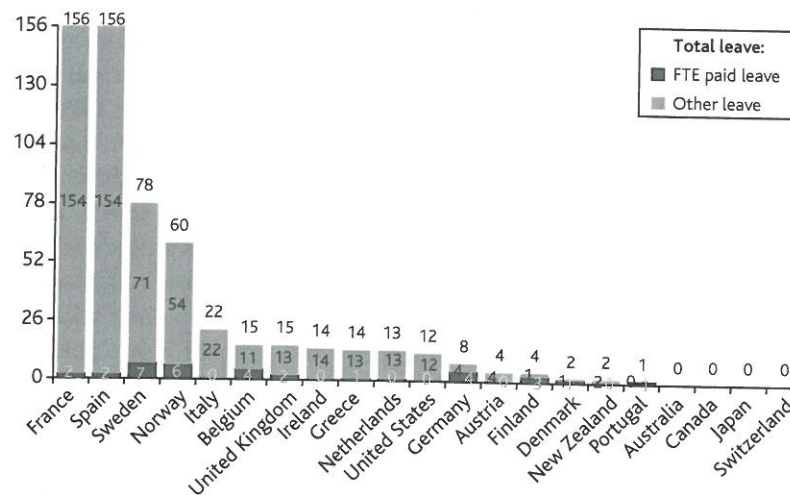
mothers. Thus, this figure captures periods of leave granted only to fathers (paternity leave), other periods granted to individuals (including fathers), and periods of leave set up as the father's quota – this measure captures, in essence, the minimum paternal entitlement. Given the social and economic pressures acting on fathers, the paternity leave and the father's quota are often the only days that fathers take. (Figure 17.1 reflects these policies as they existed in January 2009.)

On the high end, a handful of countries offer fathers (unpaid) job-protected leave in excess of one year, including both Sweden and Norway. The vast majority of countries offer much less, however, and four countries offer nothing at all to fathers (Australia, Canada, Japan and Switzerland).

Overall, *paid* leave available for fathers is remarkably limited. As of 2009, Sweden offered fathers the most such leave; Norway offered substantially less; Finland and Denmark even less (Ray et al, 2010, unfortunately did not include Iceland). Ten countries, including the US, provided neither paid paternity nor paid parental leave reserved for fathers.

Second, recent research suggests that fathers appear to be more likely to take up the leave to which they *are* entitled under certain circumstances – specifically, when the effective wage replacement rate is high, when some or all of fathers' rights cannot be transferred to

Figure 17.1: Total and FTE (full-time equivalent) paid leave for fathers in couples, in weeks, 2009¹



Source: Figure 3 in Ray, Gornick, Schmitt 2010

their (usually female) partners, and when leave can be taken flexibly (for example, part-time, intermittently).²

Even though most parental leave schemes in high-income countries are now designed on a gender-neutral basis (outside of a brief health-related period reserved exclusively for mothers), the progress in many countries has been slow in getting fathers to take any parental leave, let alone an equal share. In countries such as Germany, France and Austria, 2 per cent of fathers participate in leave compared to 90 per cent of mothers, reflecting, in part, 'traditional norms' and beliefs that 'parental leave continues to be a women's affair' (de Henau et al, 2007, p 80). Women are not only more likely to take leave, but they are also usually the sole participants in leave (de Henau et al, 2007).

These enormous gender differences in leave take-up have prompted several studies aimed at identifying the most successful practices for encouraging fathers' take-up (Bruning and Plantenga, 1999; Leira, 1999; Björnberg, 2002; Pylkkänen and Smith, 2004; Deven and Moss, 2005; Eriksson, 2005; O'Brien, 2005; Duvander and Andersson, 2006; de Henau et al, 2007; Eydal and Gíslason, 2008; Jónsdóttir and Aðalsteinsson, 2008).

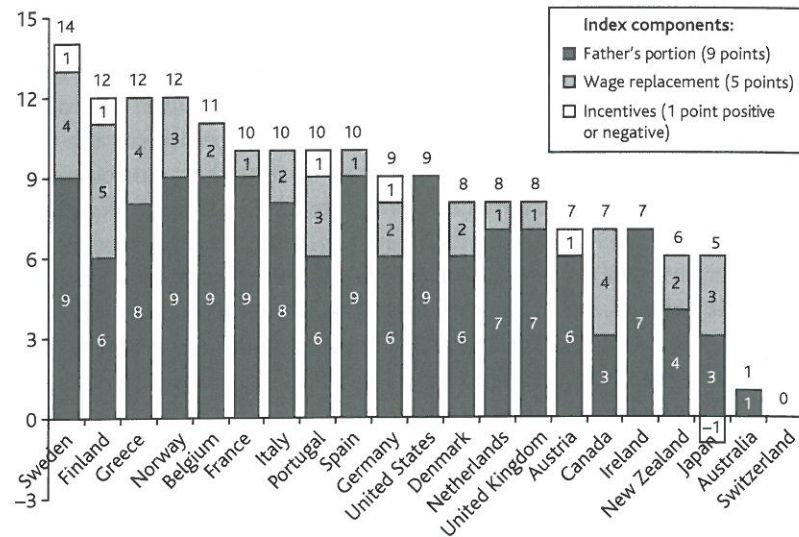
One country, Portugal, has made five days of paternity leave obligatory (on the same principle that new mothers must take 90 days leave around the time of the birth of their child), leading to a steep increase (although not universal take-up) in the use of the obligatory portion, and also in the proportion of men making use of additional leave entitlements (Wall and Leitao, 2008). Beyond such measures, specific design features of policies also have an impact. Men's leave take-up is much more sensitive to wage replacement levels than is the case with women, with countries with higher reimbursements often having more father take-up, leading researchers to see replacement rates at 80-100 per cent as a step toward universal father take-up (Deven and Moss, 2005). In Luxembourg and Norway, where income replacement rates are high, use of paternity/parental leave by men is very high (de Henau et al, 2007). In Slovenia, two thirds of all fathers take the portion of paternity leave paid at 100 per cent of wage replacement, but the uptake of additional leave paid at a much lower rate of wage replacement drops to a few percentage points (Stropnik, 2008). Where wage replacement is below 100 per cent, few parents in couples are able to afford a simultaneous reduction in income for both of them. Pre-existing differences in earnings, with male jobs typically paying more than female jobs, also tend to reinforce a traditional division of care work, with women making use of leave and men continuing in full employment.

Yet even in countries with high wage replacement levels, women have been the majority of leave takers, and policymakers have reacted by increasing incentives for a more equal share of leave by providing portions of leave to each parent on a non-transferable ('use-it-or-lose-it') basis, meaning that unless the father takes leave, leave is lost to the family. Research predating this volume from Iceland, Norway and Sweden revealed increases in fathers' use of leave with the introduction of the non-transferable father's quota (Leira, 1999; Björnberg, 2002; Eriksson, 2005; Duvander and Andersson, 2006; see Ray et al, 2010, for a detailed discussion of non-transferability). As can be expected, this policy design feature receives sustained attention in this volume.

In addition, a strong preference for leave flexibility among fathers has been noted in several countries. Where fathers do take leave (in addition to paternity leave, which must usually be taken close to the birth or adoption of a child), they are much more likely than mothers to make use of flexible arrangements allowing them to take leave as a reduction in working hours rather than as full-time leave. In Belgium, all employees are entitled to a 12-month job-protected career break, which can either be taken in a single block or spread out over a longer period by reducing the weekly workload, up to a maximum of five years at 80 per cent. Although women proportionately continue to be three times as likely as men to take such leave to care for children, take-up among men has grown rapidly (albeit from a low base), and men have been particularly likely to choose the 80 per cent option (Vandeweyer and Glorieux, 2008). Likewise in the Netherlands, on average, fathers who took parental leave (Dutch fathers have a comparatively high take-up rate, at over one fifth of men entitled to leave) took it as a 20 per cent reduction in the usual working hours (Greonendijk and Keuzenkamp, 2008, p 261). In Germany, a policy reform introduced in 2001, making it possible to combine parental leave with up to 30 hours of weekly part-time work, resulted in a tripling of the proportion of fathers taking parental leave, although the overall numbers remain limited (Bundesregierung Deutschland, 2004, p 18).

Third, the extent to which the underlying architecture is gender-egalitarian – in practice – varies from country to country. Ray et al (2010) constructed a 15-point gender equality scale and applied it to the same 21 countries (noted above). This index consists of three components: the portion of a couple's leave that is available to fathers (worth 9 points), the wage replacement rate during the father's leave (worth 5 points), and additional incentives or disincentives for fathers to take parental leave (worth 1 point, positive or negative) (see Ray et al, 2010, for details).³ The results are reported in Figure 17.2 below.

Figure 17.2: Gender Equality Index, 2009



Source: Figure 4 in Ray, Gornick, Schmitt 2010

These results indicate that, as of 2009, Sweden earned the highest score on this index, with 14 points. Finland, Greece⁴ and Norway each earned 12 points, and Belgium followed, with 11 points. France, Italy, Portugal and Spain each received 10 points. Germany and the US fell at the median of nine points. Denmark, the Netherlands and the UK trailed closely behind at 8 points. Austria, Ireland and Canada each earned 7 points, and four countries scored fewer than 7 points: New Zealand (6), Japan (5), Australia (1), and Switzerland (0) (again, Ray et al, 2010, unfortunately, did not include Iceland).

In a final analysis (not shown here), Ray et al (2010) combined measures of leave generosity with scores on this gender equality index. In short, four countries fell among the five most generous with respect to paid leave *and* among the five most gender-egalitarian. These four countries included three Nordic countries – Finland, Norway and Sweden – and Greece. Each of these countries provides couples with six months or more of fully paid leave and scores 12 or more points on this gender equality index. Taken as a group, then, these four countries have policy features that appear to go the furthest in promoting both generosity and gender equality.

Caring fathers in the Nordic countries: further lessons

Despite this substantial amount of accumulated knowledge to date, the literature on fathers and leave has remained incomplete in many ways. *Fatherhood in the Nordic welfare states: Comparing care policies and practice* offers a wealth of new research on fathers and fathering practices in the five Nordic countries – both deepening and broadening the knowledge about fathers and leave.

Few questions are asked of comparative leave scholars, especially in Anglo-Saxon settings, more often than this one: ‘If the Nordic countries have such well-developed and gender-egalitarian leave policies, why does men’s take-up so substantially lag behind women’s?’ Several studies in this volume shed light on the answers to that question.

In the remainder of this brief chapter, I highlight three illuminating findings, which recur throughout this collection and extend current knowledge, especially about the barriers to gender-egalitarian leave usage.⁵ While some of these ‘new’ findings may not be especially new to Nordic analysts, they are relatively new, or at least under-emphasised, in the larger body of leave scholarship.

First, a range of results reported in this volume underscore that gendered expectations regarding paid and unpaid work remain powerful and consequential – ‘even’ in these notoriously (relatively) gender-egalitarian Nordic countries. Despite the strong signal sent by the state, indicating that father-provided care is valued, many men and women adhere to traditional gendered role allocation – they ‘do gender’, if you will – which in turn constrains the power of the structural innovations embedded in the leave laws.

For example, in their study of obstacles to fathers’ leave-taking in Finland, Salmi and Lammi-Taskula highlight the persistence of gendered role-taking:

Views on the division of labour between women and men turned out to play a crucial role when parents make decisions on sharing the parental leave. When education level, spouse’s education level, income level, employer sector and occupational group of fathers were taken into account, only the age of the father and his view on men as the main provider for the family predicted his take-up of parental leave. (Chapter Fourteen, this volume)

Stunningly, Salmi and Lammi-Taskula report that only one in three families actually made calculations regarding the financial consequences of the father's leave. Prior notions about who should take leave were often (apparently) unaffected by the financial realities that policy designers believe to be so central to family decision making.

Clearly, despite dramatic shifts in gender roles in recent decades, many men and women in the Nordic countries still 'do gender'. Part of this practice includes, *ceteris paribus*, allocating work and care responsibilities according to gender. While the mere existence of gendered role allocation is not unexpected, the magnitude and power of 'gendering' as a continued obstacle to fathers' leave-taking – a recurring theme throughout this volume – may surprise (and disappoint) many readers.

Second, workplace actors and practices remain another substantial barrier to more extensive use of leave by fathers. Findings reported in this collection indicate that – in many cases – employers and places of employment continue to impede fathers' leave-taking. That constraint interacts with stubbornly gendered expectations, further undermining the potential of policy design elements aimed at shoring up men's take-up.

While many chapters address this, workplace constraints (intertwined with gendered expectations) are treated in the greatest detail in Bloksgaard's chapter on negotiating leave in the Danish workplace.⁶ About her three workplace study, Bloksgaard concludes:

This chapter has shown that highly gendered expectations for women and men as parents/leave-takers and workers/providers, respectively, exist in the three workplaces studied. These findings confirm earlier Danish workplace studies.... the sharable and assumed gender-neutral Danish parental leave is perceived as being 'for mothers'. This finding supports research in the other Nordic countries showing that the mother usually takes all of the sharable leave entitlement and the father only the elements earmarked specifically for fathers.... In Denmark, there is neither a strong cultural ideal of 'the present father' as one who takes leave nor a legislative father's quota setting limits for fathers' work-life and legitimising leave as 'appropriate behaviour' for fathers in the workplace. (Chapter Seven, this volume)

Third, the research presented in this volume brings into relief how fathers' leave-taking is 'classed': for multiple reasons, constraints on

leave usage are more severe among lower-earning, lower-income and/or less educated men. In addition to suppressing men's leave-taking in the aggregate, the existence of class gradients raises the spectre of hidden forms of inequality among fathers and their families as well as the possibility that leave policies might inadvertently worsen some forms of inequality (prior to this volume, several scholars assessed the class gradient in women's access to and use of leave, but much less has been known about how men's leave is 'classed').

A recurring theme in this volume is the diversity of experiences seen among men. Rostgaard and Lausten sum this up in reference to the Danish case:

Consequently, we witness an increasing discrepancy among fathers over time, in those who take leave and those who do not.... [It] is now more the well-educated fathers ... with well-educated partners who take parental leave, presumably because they stand in a better situation in the labour market – they may have secured better leave rights and may also have a partner who is more eager herself to return to the labour market.... The present composition of statutory leave entitlements positions fathers differently, however, thus working against the Nordic principle of universalism. (Chapter Thirteen, this volume)

Obviously, the evidence of class effects is not limited to Denmark. Duvander and Johansson find (possibly increasing) class-related disparities in Sweden: '... and the result was thus remaining or increasing differences between groups of fathers.' Eydal and Gislason, referring to Iceland, report that one 'group that seems to call for special attention is the low-earning households', adding that it 'is not entirely clear why there are fewer fathers in this group that make use of their right.' Brandth and Kvande's rich and nuanced study of 'classed fathering practices' in Norway concludes that care 'is reconciled with norms of masculinity' in both the working and middle classes; it 'may, however, proceed at different speeds and along rather varied roads.'

In conclusion, this methodologically diverse, rich, broad and innovative volume sheds invaluable light on the contemporary state of fathers and parental leave in the Nordic countries. Three key findings are likely to 'jump out' at leave scholars – especially from outside the Nordic countries. In short, (1) gendered expectations about work and care still matter (and they matter a lot); (2) workplaces present constraints (in part by cementing the gendered practices that still

guide many families' decision making and behaviour); and (3) fathers' leave-taking is 'classed', meaning that effective access to, and use of, leave remains disparate across groups of men. Nordic scholars, policy advocates and policymakers still have plenty of work to do – as they continue to strive for societies characterised by gender-egalitarian parenting and the principles of universalism.

Notes

¹ Editors' note: For an overview of available leave periods in the Nordic countries as of 2013 see Chapter Thirteen.

² This section, on policy features associated with men's take-up, is drawn from a literature review on the impact of work-family policies, prepared for The World Bank (forthcoming) by Janet C. Gornick and Ariane Hegewisch.

³ Ray et al (2010) recognised that a more comprehensive index would have included a component capturing flexibility, but it was outside the scope of their study.

⁴ While a large body of prior literature has reported that the Nordic countries have social policies in place that support gender equality, earlier research had not painted Greece as a high performer in this area. At the same time, it is important to stress that while the Greek law has gender-egalitarian design elements, its impact may be comparatively limited. Greece – even before the severe crisis – had much higher shares of self-employment and informal employment than these three Nordic countries and a higher share than most of the rest of the sample as well. High rates of self-employment and informality reduce the effective coverage rates for parental leave policies.

⁵ Although issues related to leave are laced throughout this volume, I direct most of my remarks to Chapter Six, on classed fathering practices in Norway, Chapter Seven, on negotiating leave in the Danish workplace, and on the four chapters in the final section: Chapter Thirteen, about gendered incentives in Denmark, Chapter Fourteen, about obstacles in Finland, Chapter Fifteen, that focused on the Icelandic case and Chapter Sixteen, on Swedish reforms.

⁶ It is important to note that Denmark is something of a Nordic outlier inasmuch as workers must negotiate their own leave rights and options. In that sense, the Danish case provides the most intense look at the constraints that come into play when fathers must negotiate individually – as is the case in many non-Nordic countries.

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Nordic fathers: tracking diversity and complexity

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In a rapidly changing world, we will continue witnessing the growing momentum and recognition of the importance of men for gender equality, reconciling work-family life and impacting the future of their children.

(UN, 2011, p 49)

Introduction

The Nordic countries have been a global touchstone for policymakers and academics concerned with encouraging the greater participation of fathers in childcare and gender equality. They have led the way in devising work-family policy innovation, and attempts to emulate (under the banner of taking a 'Nordic turn') are occurring across Europe (Erler, 2009) and in other regions of the world (Chin et al, 2011). This collection represents a very welcome addition to the international scholarship on fathers, because, despite over half a century of pioneering research (Haas and Hwang, 2013), there have been few books solely devoted to Nordic fathers, and none representing the full range of Nordic countries: Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. The breadth and depth of new knowledge about the state of contemporary Nordic fathers is impressive; there is insight into the institutional context in which fathers shape their personal, family and working lives together with specific studies of men's experiences as fathers.

This brief chapter focuses on a common theme cutting across many chapters – the growing diversity and complexity of the household and family relationships of Nordic men with partners and children. While all Nordic governments promote a dual earner/dual carer social democratic welfare state model emphasising the active participation of fathers in childcare, variations in policy and family practices exist. Differences are connected to historical and cultural legacies within