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*Research Article*

### **Fathers on call? A study on the sharing of care work between parents in Sweden**

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## **Fathers on call?** **A study on the sharing of care work between parents in Sweden**

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### **Abstract**

#### **BACKGROUND**

Swedish fathers' parental leave uptake has increased over time, but progress has been moderate. In relation to this, we ask what factors hinder or facilitate the taking of leave by fathers and how – if at all – the leave influences the father's relationship with his child.

#### **OBJECTIVE**

To study (i) the reasons for parents' division of parental leave as well as the consequences this division has for their actual time at home with the child and (ii) the link between the father's leave and his relationship with the child, as well as the parents' division of childcare after parental leave.

#### **METHODS**

A multi-methods approach is used, where OLS regression models of survey data from the Young Adult Panel Study are analysed alongside qualitative in-depth interviews with 13 couples who have had a first child.

#### **RESULTS**

Quantitative results show that parents' leave lengths vary with the reasons given for the division of leave and that fathers' parental leave is related to long-term division of childcare. Qualitative results suggest that equal parenting is important to the interviewed parents; however, motherhood ideals may stand in the way of achieving it. Several mechanisms by which fathers' parental leave may influence later division of childcare are suggested, including the development of a closer relationship between father and child.

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## **CONCLUSIONS**

Policies aimed towards increasing fathers' parental leave uptake have the potential to strengthen the father–child bond, contribute to a more equal division of childcare, and facilitate both parents' understanding of each other and what being a stay-at-home parent involves.

## **1. Introduction**

Previous research and common knowledge tell us that the transition to parenthood is more life changing for mothers than for fathers. Mothers often take long periods of leave from their paid employment to care for the newborn child and often work part-time once the child starts day care. Although fathers' parental leave uptake has increased in Sweden, progress has been fairly slow and is not evenly distributed in the population. Couples with higher education are the most likely to share the parental leave equally (Social Insurance Report 2013: 8). If fathers' parental leave uptake has long-term consequences for the father–child relationship even after a divorce (cf. Duvander and Jans 2009; Westphal, Poortman, and van der Lippe 2014), this will result in lasting and perhaps growing differences in father–child bonds by educational level of the parents. Consequently, learning more about what motivates couples to increase the father's period of leave is important from the perspective of family cohesion as well as of gender equality. Here, we focus on Sweden, a country with political strategies and social policies explicitly designed to make it easier for both mothers and fathers to combine paid work and childcare.

In particular, we study (i) what factors are the most vital in parents' decisions regarding how to share their parental leave and how these reasons are linked to the actual length of the father's and/or mother's leave and (ii) the extent to which fathers' parental leave length is related to their later relationship with and care of the child. Instead of turning to quantitative analyses of background factors such as income, education, etc., we ask the parents themselves about their motives and the perceived consequences of their division of leave. We expand on and update earlier research (e.g., Hobson, Duvander, and Halldén 2006) by studying how parents' suggested reasons for the division of leave are linked to the mother's and father's actual time on leave. If commonly provided reasons for the division of leave have little influence on the length of mothers' and fathers' leave, this will be useful information for policy makers aiming to increase gender equality.

We apply a multi-methods approach, using quantitative as well as qualitative data and methods to answer our research questions. From quantitative models based on

survey data, we develop an understanding of the extent to which motives for leave division are linked to actual division of leave and the extent to which shared leave taking is linked to smaller gender differences in time spent (later) on care for the child. In qualitative interviews with 26 first-time, middle-class parents, we qualify the quantitative results by analysing how motives and leave taking are linked to fatherhood and motherhood practices and fathers' subsequent relationships with their children. In couples with lower incomes and/or educational levels, leave is often divided in line with more traditional gendered behaviour (Evertsson 2016; Sundström and Duvander 2002), leaving less room for the fatherhood discourse to include a caring component (cf. Plantin 2007; Johansson and Klinth 2010). Hence, the interviewed couples can be seen as forerunners of change and examples to learn from in a country that is considered one of the most egalitarian in the world.

## **2. Motherhood/fatherhood norms and practices: Sharing the care (leave)?**

In recent decades, an involved fatherhood ideal has emerged, including a 'child-oriented masculinity' (Bekkengen 2002; cf. Johansson and Klinth 2010; Miller 2011; Roman and Peterson 2011). The right for fathers to take paid parental leave is likely to strengthen this 'new fatherhood' ideal, particularly if gender equality is a main goal of the policy, as in Sweden (Haas and Rostgaard 2011; Hobson, Duvander, and Halldén 2006). In particular, quotas for fathers have encouraged fathers to spend time as sole daytime caregivers of young children (Bergman and Hobson 2002; Duvander and Johansson 2012; Haas and Rostgaard 2011).

Even though norms of the 'good father' have changed quite a bit, fathers may still be portrayed as secondary parents, shouldering less responsibility for family life and children's well-being than mothers (Wall and Arnold 2007). In a comparison of discourses on early motherhood and fatherhood in eight European countries, a majority of the couples interviewed adhered to the belief that the mother is more important than the father during the child's first few months to a year (Grunow and Evertsson 2016). Some even argue that men cannot 'mother' (cf. Doucet 2006), linking this to a female, supposedly biological, predisposition that fathers lack. Discourses like these can discourage men from taking leave and present fathers with alternative ways to fulfil the role of good parent, a role in which he is freer to choose whether and how to incorporate elements of child-oriented masculinity (Johansson and Klinth 2007; Miller 2011). This has consequences for who becomes a caring father. If the couple has gender egalitarian attitudes (Duvander 2014; Hyde, Essex, and Horton 1993) and/or considers the sharing of leave to be important, or if the father has a strong desire to take leave, his

leave uptake will likely be higher. If the mother has family-oriented attitudes (Duvander 2014) and/or desires to take a long leave, her wish may trump the father's potential wish to take leave, as she can rely on gender norms and expectations concerning the baby's need for its mother. In the empirical part of this paper, we study what reasons have the greatest consequences for the fathers' and the mothers' leave length.

Parents' preferences for leave taking are not determined in a vacuum. A factor that often plays a role is the parents' paid work. However, mothers' and fathers' parental leave are often perceived differently by the couples themselves as well as by employers. Working conditions that make it difficult to take parental leave or to plan it freely are sometimes seen as a hindrance to men taking leave but only as an inconvenience for women (Bekkengen 2002). Gendered expectations cause men who take parental leave not only to break norms related to the unencumbered worker (Acker 1990) but also traditional masculinity norms. Workers who do not fit the profile of an unencumbered worker, free from out-of-work obligations, tend to be disadvantaged in the workplace (Acker 1990; Glass 1999; Glauber 2008). In a reaffirmation of gendered practices, parents in Sweden more commonly cite the father's work situation than the mother's as determining the division of leave (Socialförsäkringsboken 2003; see also Bygren and Duvander 2006). Here, we study actual leave length among parents who cite the mother's or the father's work situation as the main reason for their division of leave.

Mothering norms seem to have changed less than fathering norms. Many mothers work as many hours as men do in paid work. Even when they do, however, mothers, to a far greater extent than fathers, are still expected to be primarily guided by the ethics of the child's best interests and the intensive mothering ideal (Hays 1996; Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards, and Gillies 2000). This ideal associates good mothering with considerable time, energy, and emotional investments in the child and with prioritizing mothering over other areas of life. Focusing on the Swedish context, Elvin-Nowak and Thomsson (2001) identified parallel, and contradictory, discourses about motherhood in their qualitative study from the 1990s. The discourses described an idealized good, self-fulfilled mother who does everything for her child at the same time as she is engaged in a career. This had the effect of legitimizing women's paid work, but at the same time it led to a wish to not appear as too work-oriented. In other words, prioritizing work over childcare goes against motherhood norms. The strength of these norms and the degree to which women have internalized them are indicated by the mothers' narratives about feelings of guilt.

### **3. Earlier research on (assumed) consequences of fathers' involvement in care**

Research shows that fathers' parental leave length is related to their continued contact with a child after a divorce (Duvander and Jans 2009; Westphal, Poortman, and van der Lippe 2014). It is often assumed that spending more time with a child when it is an infant furthers a father's relationship with the child in the short as well as the long run. Although it is often difficult to disentangle the mechanisms, it is reasonable to assume that the observed correlation is partly due to selectivity (i.e., more child-oriented fathers self-selecting into long parental leaves) and partly due to causality. Fathers who have taken a significant share of the parental leave may feel more confident in their relationship with the child and in their fathering ability.

Research demonstrates that fathers who have taken parental leave do more of the housework than other fathers (Boye 2008; Almqvist and Duvander 2014; Haas and Hwang 2008; Kotsadam and Finseraas 2011). Boye (2008), focusing on Sweden in the 1990s, finds that fathers who took at least one month of leave increased their housework hours more than fathers who took less or no leave. In addition, the increase in women's share of housework (after the birth) is much smaller in couples where the fathers took at least a month of leave. There is less research on the link between parental leave uptake and childcare. However, Almqvist and Duvander (2014) find that couples share the childcare more equally when the fathers have taken two months of leave or more. Parents' reasons for the division of the leave have mostly been studied qualitatively (Almqvist 2008; Roman and Peterson 2011). In a quantitative study, Hobson, Duvander, and Halldén (2006) find that common reasons for Swedish couples' division of leave are the father's work and the mother's wish to be home the longest. In this study, we expand the number of reasons for leave and also compare the actual outcome in terms of the mother's and the father's leave length.

### **4. The Swedish parental leave insurance**

The quantitative analyses in the empirical part of this study are based on respondents who had their first child in the years 2000–2009. Parents who had their first child before 2002 were able to use 450 days of job-protected parental leave for each child, of which 30 were reserved for each parent. In 2002, an additional 30 days were reserved for each parent, and the total leave extended to 480 days for each child. For those who meet the eligibility criteria (240 work days preceding the leave), all but 90 days are paid at close

to 80% of their earlier income, up to a ceiling.<sup>4</sup> The remaining 90 days are paid at a much lower flat rate, a flat rate that extends to the full parental leave period for individuals who do not meet the work requirement. In the period from 2000 to 2009, men's share of parental leave days increased from 12% to 22%. The fathers' share of the days for children under two years of age was slightly lower, about 19% in 2009 (Duvander and Viklund 2014). The introduction of the second reserved month in 2002 resulted in a small increase of 6–7 days in fathers' as well as mothers' average parental leave uptake (Duvander and Johansson 2012). In the period studied, the parental leave insurance could be utilized until the child turned eight years old. From the age of 1, children have the right to highly subsidized public day care. Most children start day care when they are about 1.5 years old (Duvander 2006).

## **5. Analytical strategy, data, and methods**

Our methodological approach is complementary (cf. Small 2011). By combining information from qualitative interviews with quantitative analyses of survey data, we get a better understanding of the reasons for parents' division of parental leave and the mechanisms that contribute to a potential link between parental leave uptake and father–child relationships and care. Whereas the qualitative interviews focus on first-time parents, the quantitative data also include those with two or more children, as otherwise the number of cases would be too small (see Tables A-1 and A-2 for descriptions of the samples). While the quantitative analyses of large-scale data give us a profound understanding of general patterns and relationships, qualitative analyses of the interview data – although not generalizable to the population – provide a depth of interpretation and suggestions for possible mechanisms underlying some of the quantitative findings. We analyse (i) the reasons parents provide for their division of parental leave and the link between these reasons and mothers' and the fathers' leave length, and (ii) consequences of the division of leave for the fathers' relationship with the child and the sharing of childcare when both parents have returned to work.

We start with the survey data and an analysis of how various reasons are linked to the actual leave length of mothers and fathers in an OLS regression. We thereafter study the extent to which fathers' parental leave uptake is linked to the fathers' care of the child once both parents are back at work in a stepwise regression model. Moving on to the qualitative data, we analyse parents' narratives on the division of leave, fleshing out various motives as well as perceived care-related consequences of their leave division.

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<sup>4</sup> Most employed parents are also covered by different forms of parental leave supplements through their employers, providing them with in total 80%–90% of earlier earnings for a limited period of time, even when their earnings are above the insurance ceiling (Social Insurance Report 2011: 11).

## 5.1 Quantitative data

The survey data comes from the third wave of the Swedish Young Adult Panel Study (YAPS). YAPS was initiated in 1999, when a questionnaire was mailed to a nationally representative sample of 3,408 individuals born in 1968, 1972, and 1976 (response rate 67%) (Principal Investigator was Eva Bernhardt, Stockholm University). In 2003, a follow-up was conducted, and a new cohort of respondents who were born in 1980 was added. In 2009, the 3,547 respondents who replied to the survey in 1999 and/or 2003 received a follow-up questionnaire. In total 1,986 (56%) of those who received the 2009 follow-up returned a completed questionnaire (for more information on the YAPS, see [www.suda.su.se/yaps](http://www.suda.su.se/yaps)). In addition, a questionnaire similar to the one distributed to the main respondents was distributed to any partner or spouse in the household,<sup>5</sup> and 69% of the respondents had a partner who filled in the partner questionnaire. The current analysis uses data from the third (2009) wave only, and the sample is restricted to those who had their first child in the year 2000 or later. This selection resulted in a first sample of 987 main respondents; 393 men and 594 women. In the analysis of the division of childcare (Table 1), only cohabiting/married partners are included, and we exclude couples in which one of the partners is on parental leave with any (sometimes a new) child at the time of the survey. In this household-level analysis, information from the main and the partner questionnaire is included. In the descriptive analysis of reasons for the division of parental leave and its length, we maximise the number of cases by also using information from main respondents whose partners did not answer the questionnaire.

Initial exploratory analyses indicated that fathers underestimate mothers' parental leave length more than vice versa (assuming that the figure for mothers' parental leave length does not depend on who is reporting, whether it comes from mothers when they are the main respondents or from fathers when they are the main respondents and mothers are the partner respondents). Therefore, we do not use the information from male (main) respondents when estimating female (partner) respondents' parental leave length (see the grey bars in Figure 1). For men, however, we use the information they provide as main respondents about themselves as well as the information provided by their partners (when the partners are the main respondents) in order to maximize the number of cases in the analyses (see the black bars in Figure 1).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> As an example, main respondents were asked to provide extensive information about each child. This included reports of the length of their own as well as their partner's parental leave with each child. As this information is only needed once per household, there were no questions on parental leave length in the partner questionnaire.

<sup>6</sup> In order to check if this was a wise decision, we have estimated the models for Figure 1 based only on men as the main respondent. Although relationships weaken and become insignificant in some cases (probably due

When cases with internal non-response are excluded, together with the above-mentioned selections, information on 331 couples remains in the analysis on the division of childcare, and information on 404 men and 444 women remains in the analysis of the reasons for taking leave. In Table A-1, descriptive statistics are presented for various variables included in the childcare analysis. The table is based on the couple sample in Table 1, Model 1 ( $n = 331$ ). The average birth year of the child for which the most recent leave was concluded is 2004, and the average age of the father at the time of interview is 37.

## 5.2 Variables

Parental leave time with the youngest child is measured in weeks. From the main respondent, we have information on the total parental leave period taken for each child by the respondent and her/his partner. We use this information to create variables for fathers' and mothers' parental leave length respectively. The leave indicator covers all, including couples in which either the mother or the father took 0 leave. In order to reduce the influence of influential outliers (i.e., very long leaves), we use a logged indicator of parental leave.

Respondents were asked about the main reasons for the length of their most recently concluded parental leave. If they provided more than one reason, they were told to indicate the most important reason. Nine different responses were pre-defined (see Table A-3) as well as an 'other,' open text answer. As the parents give a reason for the actual leave length, the data does not allow us to study who wins out if parents have conflicting ideas about how to divide the leave. In the analyses of the longitudinal, qualitative data, we are in a better position to compare couples' discussions about the leave and, in particular, to compare those aiming for an equal division of leave with those open to more traditional arrangements. In our model estimating how various reasons are linked to leave length, we control for the year of leave uptake. In both the qualitative and the quantitative data, the questions and answers on motives for the leave are retrospective. Hence, the answers given may be influenced by the actual leave length, experiences during the leave, etc.

The indicator of father's involvement in childcare includes information on who (i) most often puts the children to bed, (ii) handles contacts with pre-schools or schools, (iii) remains home when the children are sick, and (iv) buys and cares for the children's clothes. This indicator involves tasks that are time-consuming, can interfere with the parents' paid work, and demand that parents engage in planning. In addition, it captures

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to the reduction of the number of cases included), these analyses do not change any of the main conclusions (estimates available from the authors).

qualitative aspects of the childcare that can strengthen the parent–child bond. Putting children to bed can be a moment of closeness. Staying at home with a sick child calls for comforting skills that can contribute to feelings of trust and safety in the child. Each of the childcare items varies from –2, indicating that the woman most often performs the chore, to +2, indicating that the man most often performs the chore. A value of 0 indicates that the parents share the duties equally. When respondents stated that one of the chores is not relevant to them, the value for that item was coded as 0. In the multivariate analysis, we use a standardized version of this index with a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1.

Main and partner respondents provide information on the number of weekly work hours as well as on their (own) yearly income. Work hours vary from 0–55 for women and 0–60 for men.<sup>7</sup> Income level is divided into eight categories from below 100,000 SEK to over 500,000 SEK. Finally, in the multivariate analyses (Table 1), we control for the age of the father. In Table 1, we also initially included the parents' education. However, these indicators were not statistically significant (once controls for income were included) and not included in the final models. Even so, we keep education in the descriptive Table A-1 in order to facilitate comparisons with other data and samples.

### 5.3 Qualitative data

We analyse semi-structured interviews with 26 Swedish first-time parents (13 married or cohabiting couples) who were interviewed in 2010–2011, when their first child was approximately 1.5 years old. In all cases, both partners were employed, most of them in middle-class occupations, and worked at least half-time at the time of the interview. Most interviewees had a higher level of education than the population average. The aim was to find couples for whom the division of parental leave was not given (i.e., where within-couple income differences were not too big). We therefore chose couples in which both partners were established in the labour market. The parents were also interviewed once during the pregnancy in 2009. All couples interviewed in the first round participated in the second round, and both partners in each couple were interviewed in both rounds. By the second interview, all couples had one child, and all interviewees were back at work after parental leave. The interviewees discussed their parental leave plans in the interview during pregnancy. We can therefore compare the

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<sup>7</sup> In separate analyses, we excluded (i) couples where either the woman or the man has 0 work hours (about 35 women and less than 10 men) or (ii) work at most ten hours per week. The analyses resulted in very small changes in coefficients, although standard errors increased (resulting in some coefficients turning insignificant due to the small sample). However, the link between the division of childcare and father's parental leave length – the indicator of main interest – was strengthened.

actual division of leave, motives given for the leave, etc. in the couples who planned to divide the leave equally before the birth and those who had more traditional leave plans.

A thematic analysis is applied in which we categorize theoretically derived themes and themes that emerge from the data. The analysis is done on an individual- and a couple-level basis. We explore the importance of social norms regarding how long women should stay at home with their babies as well as norms related to new and more traditional fatherhood ideals. We also explore how men in particular talk about their relationship with their child and the degree to which this relationship benefits from shared parenting and/or fathers' leave-taking behaviour. A description of the interviewed couples in terms of age, occupation, income, etc. is found in Table A-2.

## **6. Findings**

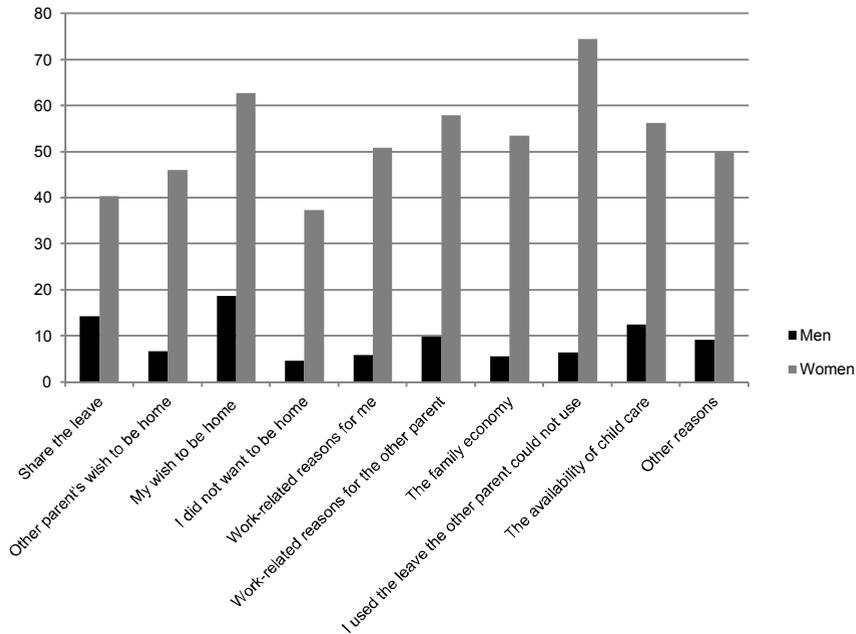
### **6.1 Parental leave length and reasons for the division of leave**

In the following, we use OLS regression to map the links between the different reasons given for use of parental leave and the length of the leave for women and men.<sup>8</sup> Women took on average 49 weeks of leave compared to 12 weeks for fathers (see Table A-1, the estimate for women;  $e^{3.9} = 49.4$  and men;  $e^{2.5} = 12.2$ ). Consequently, fathers in our sample took 19.7% of the leave on average. This corresponds very well with fathers' average share during the child's first two years as reported by Duvander and Viklund (2014). Figure 1 is based on calculations of estimates from the regression (see Table A-3). The women and men with the most equal uptake of leave are those where the respondents claim that the main reason for the leave was that they wanted to share the leave with the other parent and couples in which the man's wish to stay at home determined how the leave was divided. (Because we do not analyse couples here, the latter is determined by comparing the women's bar for "other parent's wish to be at home" with the men's bar for "my wish to be at home" in Figure 1.) In these couples, men took 14–19 weeks of leave on average and women 40–46 weeks. Leaves are most unequally divided in couples where the mother wanted to stay home for a long period, where the father did not want to stay home, where reasons related to the father's job determined the division of leave, and where the family economy was the most important consideration. In these couples, fathers took between five and seven weeks of leave and mothers 54–63 weeks on average.

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<sup>8</sup> Referring to the most recent leave.

**Figure 1: Average parental leave length in weeks for women and men in each household by main reason for the leave (calculated from the logarithmic value of leave length in weeks, Table A-3)**



One interesting finding relates to the work-related reasons for the leave. When men claim that work-related reasons determined their leave, they took on average six weeks of leave, compared to 12 weeks for the entire group, whereas women took on average 51 weeks, compared to 49 weeks for the entire group. Hence, women's leaves are on average two weeks longer when work-related reasons determine the leave, whereas men's leaves are on average six weeks shorter when work-related reasons determine their leave. This may to some extent capture occupational differences in schedules as more women than men work in preschools and schools, facilitating returns to work at the start of the semester. However, the difference in average leave length linked to work-related reasons is small for women and considerably larger for men. Not only does this illustrate the diametrically opposed implications of work for women's and men's leave length, it also verifies the assumption that the father's work conditions are more important for his leave length than the mother's work conditions are for hers (cf. Socialförsäkringsboken 2003).

## **6.2 Parental leave length and the division of childcare**

In the next step, we explore whether it is common that fathers who stayed home longer with the child also perform a greater share of the childcare when both parents are back at work. In Table 1, the constant is  $-0.91$  when we only control for the father's age and the number of children, indicating that it is slightly more common that the mother does the chores than the father (Model 1). However, given that the estimate is close to zero, the main conclusion is that most couples divide the childcare tasks included here rather equally. We also find that fathers do more childcare the higher the woman's income is and the longer her paid work hours are (Models 2 and 3, Table 1). Assuming that the reason for the leave may be related to the division of childcare, we included indicators of the reasons in various exploratory models. In the end, the most important reason seems to be the woman's desire to be at home (Table 1, Model 5). When the woman wants to be home for a long period, the division of childcare also tends to be more traditional later on. Taking into account differences in the woman's and the man's income and work hours, as well as the number of children, the analyses show that the father's parental leave length is important for how childcare is divided when neither the mother nor the father is still on parental leave. The longer the father has been on parental leave, the more likely it is that the childcare is equally divided or that the father performs more of the childcare than the mother does. In the following, we present qualitative analyses of interviews with couples who recently became parents in order to get a better understanding of some of the potential mechanisms at work here.

## **6.3 Gender equality and fatherhood ideals benefit the sharing of parental leave**

All the fathers in the interviewed couples took some parental leave. Apart from 10 leave days for fathers in connection with childbirth, joint parental leave with the same child was not allowed when these parents had their first child. However, several couples arranged to be at home together during the first few weeks by combining parental leave with vacation or other leave of absence. Over and above this leave, all fathers also spent time on leave on their own with the child.

**Table 1: OLS regression of the father's involvement in childcare**

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Age of the father	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
2 children	-0.16 (0.12)	-0.13 (0.12)	-0.12 (0.12)	-0.13 (0.12)	-0.16 (0.13)
3 or more children	-0.12 (0.15)	-0.08 (0.15)	-0.10 (0.15)	-0.11 (0.15)	-0.10 (0.16)
Woman's income		0.09** (0.03)		0.05 (0.03)	0.02 (0.04)
Man's income		-0.03 (0.04)		0.02 (0.04)	0.02 (0.04)
Woman's work hours			0.01*** (0.00)	0.01* (0.00)	0.01** (0.00)
Man's work hours			-0.01* (0.01)	-0.01* (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)
Mother's wish to be home					-0.32** (0.12)
Mother's parental leave length (ln)	-0.18+ (0.10)	-0.14 (0.11)	-0.17+ (0.10)	-0.17 (0.11)	-0.08 (0.11)
Father's parental leave length (ln)	0.48*** (0.06)	0.44*** (0.06)	0.44*** (0.06)	0.43*** (0.06)	0.37*** (0.06)
Constant	-0.91 (0.59)	-0.97 (0.63)	-0.65 (0.61)	-0.63 (0.68)	-1.11 (0.72)
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	0.21	0.23	0.25	0.25	0.25
n	331	327	331	327	290

Note: +  $p < 0.1$ ; \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ . Standard errors in parentheses.

We have divided the couples into three groups according to the plans they made for parental leave while expecting the baby. The first group planned to share the leave equally, with a difference in leave lengths of at most two months, and were quite determined to realize their plans. One couple in this group planned for the father to take two months more of leave than the mother. The couples in the second group also planned to take equal amounts of leave but were open to renegotiating this plan if certain circumstances, for example, the employment situation of a parent, were to change. The third group planned for the mother to take a longer leave than the father. In the first group, all couples realized their plans to share the leave equally. In the second group – open to being flexible in their sharing – most mothers ended up taking a longer leave than the father. The third group realized their traditional plans, with minor changes such as the woman taking an even longer leave than planned or, in a few cases, a somewhat shorter leave but still longer than the father's leave. Compared to the general population, though, all fathers in the study took a relatively long leave. A few fathers only took leave part-time, but those on full-time leave took 4–10 months. In the YAPS dataset, fathers' average leave length is about three months, and in the

population, fathers spend on average 3.5 months on leave before the child's second birthday (Duvander and Viklund 2014).

For some of the interviewed couples, gender equality and fairness were the obvious reasons for why and how parental leave should be divided (cf. the category of those who said they wanted to share the leave with the other parent, Figure 1). This was especially the case among the first group of parents. These couples, for whom equal sharing was the obvious thing to do, did not discuss whether or not to share, only how long the child should be at home and when they should make the switch between them. For Simon and Sara, who had been on parental leave for ten months each, the main reason for sharing the leave was that both parents wanted to be home with the child. It also seemed fair to share equally:

I would say that there was some kind of idea that we should each have an equal *share* of the first period. Because there's... a lot that you get to experience when you're at home with him [the child] in the daytime like that. You follow his development constantly in a somewhat different way maybe than if you see him evenings and weekends. /.../ No, but it also felt natural to share it, fair too. (Simon)

Ideals about a 'new fatherhood' stressing the father's right to spend time with his child and to develop a close relationship with the child were important reasons for fathers' wish to stay home, a wish associated in the quantitative analyses with greater equality in the division of leave. For Carlos, it was important to be at home by himself when the child was still less than one year old. Carlos expressed a conviction that for fathers, spending time with the child when it is very small fosters a long-term and close relationship.

Carlos: Yes. Closeness, exactly. So that maybe in the future, if you're having a hard time, you can hug each other. /.../ I mean, I'm a very independent person, but when I've had a hard time, I've got a hug from Dad.

Interviewer: Mm. And that has meant something?

Carlos: Yes. But I see friends who never get a hug. /.../ It's like... "There's Daddy." But they are good dads! It doesn't have anything... But it's some kind of...

Interviewer: Some kind of distance somehow?

Carlos: Yes.

Carlos believed that if men can show – especially perhaps to their sons – that it is OK to be a hugging, comforting father, then the children will be better able to express

feelings themselves as adults. Not having to be self-sufficient and strong all the time will make it easier for them to deal with difficulties and to turn to significant others in stressful periods, according to Carlos. One way for Carlos to further the child's development in this direction was to take parental leave and have sole responsibility for the child early in the child's life.

The couples who did not share the leave equally also discussed the importance of the fathers spending a significant amount of time with their small babies. For two of these couples, sharing "as much as possible" (a phrase used by Emma, Magnus, Karin, and Peter) meant that the mother and father each took part-time parental leave after the mother had been on full-time leave for 6–12 months. One reason for Karin and Peter's division of leave was the importance of fathers to infants:

We thought it would be good if we divided the leave; I mean, that it's good to share it. I mean, we had kind of understood that, well, the father is also super important. And Peter really wanted to stay at home, so... (Karin)

The gender equality discourse and the new fatherhood ideals have thus influenced the way couples thought about and justified their division of leave. In the case of Karin and Peter, these ideals meant that although the father took less leave than the mother, he stayed at home at a relatively early stage of the child's life compared to other fathers, when the child was six months old.

#### **6.4 Traditional gender norms increase the difference between women's and men's parental leave length**

Motherhood norms may be one mechanism behind the quantitative finding that mothers' wishes to take a long leave are associated with a shorter leave length among fathers (cf. Figure 1). In the interview study, traditional views on motherhood appear to be one reason why some couples chose to let the mother take longer parental leave than the father, even while stressing the importance of the father's engagement with his child. These couples described the mother as the primary and most important caretaker of their child during its first year in life, and they did not feel that this had to be explained or justified to any great extent (cf. debates and theories on intensive mothering, e.g., Hays 1996). According to Elin, for example, it was important that both she and her partner Dan stayed at home with their child, which resulted in 11 months of leave for Elin and six for Dan. Like several other couples with a similar division of leave, they based this decision partly on tradition:

But then I think that we were like, well, the mother stays home for about a year; that's how it usually is... I think. I don't know really... (Elin)

Elin seems to be referring to what she has interpreted as a norm. Norms can serve as ways to justify a more traditional division of leave, and according to Dan, the length of his leave was restricted by Elin's wish to stay at home during the first year. After a year of leave, Elin was ready to hand over the responsibility for the child to Dan, he said. Others discussed at what point in time the mother was ready to return to work or to go back up to full-time. These discussions not only indicate how motherhood norms influence conceptions of caring responsibilities, but also suggest that the mothers' feelings and experiences in relation to motherhood may limit fathers' uptake of parental leave. These experiences sometimes overshadow gender equality ideals, as exemplified by Sofie, whose experience of enjoying her parental leave made her stay at home longer than planned: "You thought you should be equal, but being at home turned out to be quite cosy" (Sofie).

Emma and Magnus are another example of a couple who stressed the father's importance to the child and facilitated his spending time with the child at the same time as they highlighted the importance of the mother in caring for infants. According to Emma, they had seen that children connected better with their fathers if the fathers were active in their everyday care. Emma, however, had taken most of the parental leave: "I've always wanted to be at home the first year, full-time." (Emma). During the second year, both Emma and Magnus worked half-time, enabling them to share the responsibility for the child. They were very happy with this arrangement, which was a result of Magnus being offered a part-time position. Emma and Magnus indirectly justified their unequal division of parental leave by highlighting the degree to which they actually shared the care of the child after its first year. This couple exemplifies how traditional motherhood ideals on the one hand, and new fatherhood and gender equality ideals on the other, can interact to produce perceptions of good mothering and fathering that incorporate parts of both discourses (cf. Bekkengen 2002; Grunow, Begall, and Buchler 2018; Wall and Arnold 2007).

## **6.5 Work-related and economic factors**

The quantitative analyses above show that couples in which the division of leave was determined by the father's job characteristics or the family economy were among those with the largest gender difference in leave length (Figure 1). The qualitative interviews present examples of how the man's paid work might be viewed differently than the woman's, especially when the couple embraced traditional views on motherhood.

Emma and Magnus, whom we discussed above, are an example of this. They were expecting their second child, and Emma was planning to take one year of full-time parental leave with this child as she had done with the first child. She was struggling to figure out how she and Magnus could care for the child themselves during a period after her leave in order for the second child not to have to begin day care until it was about 1.5 years of age. Reasoning about this, Emma accepted that Magnus's employer might not allow him to reduce his working hours, and she did not consider the possibility that Magnus would take full-time parental leave. Instead, she thought of ways to facilitate working part-time herself. Here, the woman's role as a mother took precedence over her role as an employee, while the father's role was valued differently and his work was prioritized over caring duties.

Although paid work and inflexible employers were sometimes described as obstacles to structuring parental leave in the preferred way, working for an employer who was positive toward employees' taking parental leave was mentioned as making it easier for the couples to share the leave. Lukas, who stayed home for five months after his partner Therese's year of leave, described the joy of having a supportive employer:

I had a very good manager. /.../ He said that this is the best time, "of course you should do it" [take parental leave], he said. And then I was, then I was even happier, that I... I was allowed, that nobody objected. (Lukas)

Other fathers discussed how they would have reacted had their employer responded negatively to their parental leave plans. Rather than giving in to their employer's wishes they would have quit their job, they claimed. On the one hand, Lukas's and the other fathers' discussions of their employers' attitudes show that fathers' leave is not considered as obvious a right as mothers' leave. On the other hand, the discussions of leaving an unsupportive employer, although hypothetical, suggest that fathers' state-regulated right to parental leave may empower them in situations where their leave plans are questioned.

Some mentioned the income difference in the couple as a reason why they did not share the leave equally. The interviews point to two important aspects of the connection between financial considerations and division of leave. First, economic necessity is a very real determinant of the division of leave for some couples. Second, the economic argument can be used differently depending on whether the man or the woman earns the most. One example of a father who discussed the importance of the financial situation was Petter, who initially planned to share the parental leave equally with his partner Ellen. According to Petter, changes in their economic situation, brought about by Ellen becoming unemployed during her leave and their buying their own home, meant that in the end, Petter stayed home for four months whereas Ellen stayed home for twice as

long. Ellen, however, did not discuss economic reasons but pointed out that Petter had been free to use his half of the leave as he pleased. This, and the fact that Petter did not decide to take a longer leave when Ellen got a permanent position at the end of her leave, suggests that Petter's leave length was not only a result of economic rationality.

Another example is Emma and Magnus, who had a small income difference to Emma's advantage. According to Magnus, the economic situation was one reason why Emma took most of the parental leave. To Emma, it was obvious that Magnus could not have stayed home the first year, as he had not accumulated the minimum number days of employment to qualify for the income-related benefit (due to studies). These two couples (Ellen and Petter, and Emma and Magnus), are examples of how the economic argument can justify a gender-typical division of parental leave both in couples where the man earns more than the woman and in couples where the woman earns more than the man (cf. Alsarve and Boye 2012; Bekkengen 2002).

## 6.6 How fathers' parental leave may influence the sharing of care

The quantitative analyses showed that after both parents returned to work following the parental leave period, fathers performed a larger share of the childcare the longer their parental leave had been. Child-oriented fathers self-selecting into long parental leaves may be one reason for this, but in so far as the association is causal, the interviews suggest several possible causal mechanisms.

Couples perceived that the father-child relationship had changed during the father's leave. Both mothers and fathers described how, after the parental leave period, the child could turn to either parent when it needed care or comfort, and fathers perceived that the child's trust in them had grown during their leave. Parents also experienced that the child favoured the parent who was currently spending the most time with the child. Dan had stayed at home for six months after his partner Elin's 11 months of leave. He regretted being so busy during Elin's leave and described his experience of taking parental leave like this:

The best thing I've ever done. *Super fun*. And... then... I got to connect with my daughter in a way that I hadn't done before. So that is super important. I recommend it to everyone. I was studying... a lot, so that I... and working full-time, when we became parents. The first year, so it was really... Yeah, the first year. Elin had to do most of the work at home. So it was a huge difference. It was *good* [to be on parental leave]. (Dan)

Lena, whose partner Carlos had taken eight months of leave, thought that most of their friends shared the childcare, housework, etc. in a similar way as they did. However, she had experienced reactions of surprise about the close relationship between Carlos and their son Liam in other social contexts:

We went to a christening where, like, in that context, the families that were there do things in a completely different way, and think it's really weird that Liam... in that period Liam only wanted his father, and was only with him ... I mean, you sense such tendencies... like vibes in some contexts... And you mustn't forget that this is how society... It's easy to live in your own little world with ideals and things like that, but it's like, attitudes like that are everywhere in society, about who the child should turn to when it is sad and things like that. (Lena)

According to traditional norms and expectations in contexts where Lena and Carlos usually did not find themselves, the mother-child relationship is supposed to be the closest.

Fathers and mothers alike described how their parental leave had made them realize the effort required to take care of a small child and the household on one's own. Petter described his parental leave as like being on call 24 hours a day. As Petter's partner Ellen explains below, both parents got to know what it feels like to be the one who stays at home all day and what it feels like to be the one who leaves the family to go to work:

I think I took it very well, just starting to work and getting into that life again. The disappointing thing was that then it was the other way around; it was Petter who was pretty hyper when I came home and, vice versa, I who was tired. So one thing that was *incredibly* good about him taking parental leave was that we understood each other. Because the arguments that may have happened while I was on parental leave and he was working... All of a sudden you had to live each other's lives. You switched places. That... was good (laughs). (Ellen)

In conclusion, the interviews highlight how ideals and practices interact to produce experiences of care and perceptions of good mothering and fathering among first-time parents. Together with the quantitative analyses, we get an understanding of some of the arguments that couples draw on when deciding to share parental leave equally, as well as the mechanisms that can stand in the way of equal sharing. The interviews also suggest ways in which a closer father-child relationship can contribute to fathers taking a more active role in childcare after both parents have returned to work. Finally, it is

worth noting that the Swedish gender-neutral parental leave policy helps the interviewed parents to realize egalitarian ideals and ideals linked to new fatherhood. These ideals are transferred into experiences that often, in our interviews, strengthened the parents' perception of the benefits of shared parenting.

## **7. Discussion**

We study the reasons for how heterosexual couples divide their parental leave as well as whether and how fathers' parental leave may be of importance for the long-term division of childcare between mothers and fathers. Using quantitative analyses of survey data, we investigate the extent to which shared parental leave-taking is linked to (1) motives behind the division of leave and (2) fathers' share of the care of the child. Analysing qualitative interviews with first-time parents, we qualify the quantitative results by studying how leave taking links to fatherhood and motherhood ideals and practices in a group of middle-class parents. The study draws on theories and previous research on 'new fatherhood' (cf. Bekkengen 2002; Johansson and Klinth 2010; Roman and Peterson 2011) and conflicting norms surrounding motherhood (in particular 'intensive mothering'), mothers' and fathers' work-orientation, and gender equality (Elvin-Nowak and Thomsson 2001; Hays 1996; Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards, and Gillies 2000).

A limitation of this study is that we draw on data that complement each other, but the samples in the quantitative and the qualitative parts differ in various ways. As an example, the quantitative analyses cannot be restricted to those with only one child (cf. the qualitative part) due the small number of cases. Hence, we emphasize that the analyses of the interviews should be seen as examples of the narratives parents can draw on when it comes to motivating the division of parental leave as well as its outcome. Still, we expect the major mechanisms contributing to a more equal division of parental leave and (later on) childcare to be similar for parents with one as well as more children.

The quantitative analyses show that the men who use the most parental leave are those who state that they want to stay at home for a long period and who want to share the leave equally with their partner. It seems that if those desires are strong enough, obstacles are overcome. Interviewed fathers with these wishes claim that they want to experience and understand their child in a similar way as the mother. They want to practice a more modern fatherhood (cf. Bekkengen 2002; Johansson and Klinth 2010) by building a close relationship with the baby from the very start.

For some couples who stress the importance of gender-egalitarian ideals, other ideals and norms around motherhood and fatherhood counteract an equal sharing of the

leave. Men whose partner wants to be at home longer were among those taking the shortest leaves (see Figure 1). The qualitative interviews show how women's wishes to be at home during the child's entire first year are connected with motherhood norms and ideals of intensive mothering that – in our interviews – often are embraced by fathers and mothers alike (in the couples that refer to them). Like all interviewed couples, these couples stress the importance of a close father–child relationship, but the first year of the child's life is seen as a special period, an exception. Even these couples often referred to their division of the leave as 'rather equal,' which highlights the strength of the equality discourse in Sweden.

Our findings also indicate that an income difference in the couple may be used as a reason for the father to take a short period of leave, regardless of who earns more, the woman or the man. Practical circumstances such as family income and factors related to the parents' employment may interact with norms and ideals and, as a result, produce different outcomes in different couples.

The length of the father's parental leave is a strong indicator of gender equality in the actual sharing of childcare after both partners have returned to work (see Table 1). The higher engagement in childcare among fathers who have taken a relatively long parental leave may be a result of selection as well as causation. The qualitative interviews give some suggestions as to how a causal association may come about. First, fathers and mothers perceive that the father–child relationship has grown stronger during the father's leave and that the child tends to turn to both parents when in need of comfort. We argued earlier that fathers who have taken parental leave may feel more comfortable and secure with their children, but the interviews indicate that it actually may be the children who are more comfortable with their fathers when they have taken a longer and/or the most recent leave. Secondly, fathers and mothers describe how the experience of full-time sole responsibility for the child during the leave period facilitated an understanding of what needs to be done in the home and around the child. When both parents have experience of staying at home full-time as well as being the one who leaves the family to go to work, understanding between them is promoted. Our results highlight how social policies such as gender-neutral parental leave, the right to reduced working hours for mothers and fathers, and high-quality, available, and affordable childcare facilitate the realization of ideals about gender equality and new fatherhood and, as a consequence, contribute to similarities in the experiences of mothers and fathers. This, in turn, may facilitate the sharing of care after the parental leave has ended, a stronger father–child bond, and stronger couple relationships, not least for those who actually share the leave.

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## Appendix

**Table A-1: Descriptive statistics on the couple sample (with a first child born in the year 2000 or later and where none of the partners are on leave at the time of the survey)**

	n (total obs.)	Women	Men
The log of the average length of last parental leave	331	3.9 (0.5)	2.5 (0.9)
Dummy for two children in the household	331	54.1%	
Dummy for three or more children in the household	331	22.7%	
Education Level	330 / 327		
1 – Primary School		1.5%	4.9%
2 – Interrupted secondary school or vocational education		15.2%	23.2%
3 – Upper secondary school (3–4 years)		20.3%	18.0%
4 – College without degree or practical vocational training		11.5%	17.4%
5 – College degree or graduate studies		51.5%	36.4%
Income	329		
1 – Below 100,000 sek		8.8%	0.9%
2 – 100,001 to 150,000 sek		8.8%	1.8%
3 – 150,001 to 200,000 sek		12.2%	3.0%
4 – 200,001 to 250,000 sek		20.4%	7.6%
5 – 250,001 to 300,000 sek		21.3%	19.2%
6 – 300,001 to 400,000 sek		18.8%	35.0%
7 – 400,001 to 500,000 sek		7.0%	17.9%
8 – Over 500,000 sek		2.7%	14.6%
Work hours per week	331	31.2 (12.9)	39.6 (8.6)
Men's involvement in childcare	331		
–8 *		0.6%	
–7		0.6%	
–6		1.5%	
–5		5.7%	
–4		10.9%	
–3		17.2%	
–2		22.6%	
–1		25.4%	
0		12.4%	
+1		2.1%	
+2		0.3%	
+3		0.3%	
+4		0.3%	

*Note:* \* –8 indicates that the mother most often does all of the four childcare chores. +8 would indicate that the father most often does all the chores.

Table A-2: The interviewed couples, characteristics at the time of the interview

Couple	Age (woman/man)	Occupation (w/m) <sup>1</sup>	Income <sup>2</sup> euros/month (w/m)	No. of hours normally worked (w/m)	Type of contract (w/m)	Currently working reduced hours or on part-time parental leave (w/m)	Currently on full-time parental leave (w/m)	Age of child in months at interview (w/m if different)
Sara & Simon	32	bank clerk	3768–4305	41	permanent, full-time	no/no	no/no	22
Sofia & Mike	36	city planner	3230–3967	40	permanent, full-time	no/no	no/no	18/23
Karin & Peter	29	teacher	2153–2891	38	permanent, full-time	no/no	no/no	19/21
Elin & Dan	32	nurse	2153–2891	33 <sup>3</sup>	permanent, full-time	yes/no	no/no	20/19
Kristina & Lars	31	teacher	2153–2891	30 <sup>3</sup>	permanent, full-time	yes/no	no/no	19
Emma & Magnus	29	teacher	<1077 <sup>3</sup>	20	temporary, part-time	no/no	yes <sup>4</sup> /no	20
Eva & Erik	34	web editor	3230–3967	64	permanent, full-time	yes/yes	no/no	19
Therese & Lukas	34	marketing consultant	3230–3967	40	permanent, full-time	no/no	no/no	18
Lena & Carlos	31	journalist	3230–3967	32 <sup>3</sup>	permanent, full-time	yes/no	no/no	20
Sofia & Johannes	31	graphics designer	2892–3229	43	permanent, full-time	no/no	no/no	16
Ninna & David	36	biological technician	2153–2891	32 <sup>3</sup>	permanent, full-time	yes/yes	no/no	17/16
Ellen & Petter	26	administrator	2153–2891	45	permanent, full-time	no/no	no/no	17
Stina & Per	37	insurance claims clerk	3230–3967	38	permanent, full-time	no/no	no/no	18

Note: <sup>1</sup> Occupations have been changed to similar occupations. <sup>2</sup> Currency conversion March 2016. <sup>3</sup> When on leave/working reduced hours. <sup>4</sup> On sick leave due to pregnancy-related health problems.

**Table A-3: OLS regression of parental leave uptake (in the logarithm of weeks of leave) for women and men, dependent on the reported main reason for how the leave was divided (controlling for year of most recent parental leave)**

Most important reason for the leave	The man's parental leave length (in In weeks)	The woman's parental leave length (in In weeks)
Wanted to share the parental leave with the other parent	REF	REF
The other parent's wish to be home/not to be home	-0.75*** (0.12)	0.13 (0.09)
I wanted to be home a long period	0.27* (0.13)	0.44*** (0.05)
I did not want to be home for so long	-1.13*** (0.23)	-0.08 (0.09)
Work related reasons for me	-0.90*** (0.12)	0.23*** (0.07)
Work related reasons for the other parent	-0.37+ (0.22)	0.36*** (0.08)
The family economy	-0.94*** (0.11)	0.28*** (0.07)
I used the part of the leave the other parent could not use	-0.79*** (0.19)	0.61** (0.19)
The availability of childcare	-0.13 (0.24)	0.33** (0.12)
Other reason	-0.43** (0.16)	0.21** (0.07)
Constant	2.66*** (0.18)	3.70*** (0.09)
Adj. R2	0.33	0.29
Total n	444	404

Note: +  $p < 0.1$ ; \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ . Standard errors in parentheses.