

Chapter 11

Fathers on Leave Alone in France: Does Part-Time Parental Leave for Men Move Towards an Egalitarian Model?

Danielle Boyer

11.1 Introduction

This chapter will focus on fathers receiving the partial rate “Complément de libre choix d’activité” (CLCA) child-rearing benefit, paid by the Family Branch of the Social Security. The allowance, a lump sum, is intended to offset the drop in salary when a mother or a father chooses part-time employment as part of a parental leave scheme (see Box 11.1). These fathers partially meet the criteria of the book’s focus on father’s leave alone: although they are only on part-time parental leave, they spend this time alone with their child, usually one whole day per week and most of the time until the child is reached the age of 3 years while their partners, in the majority of cases work full-time.

Research into the fathers’ case is interesting on several levels: they benefit from a measure traditionally granted to women – 96.3 % of the beneficiaries are female – and, by choosing not to work full-time (which is the accepted norm, especially for men) these fathers have already renounced certain gender-based professional aspirations (Bauer 2008; Bloss 2001). Besides during part-time parental leave they spend – in theory – more one-on-one time with their child,¹ although as a general rule it is rare for French fathers to take on parental duties single-handed (Lesnard 2003; Bustreel 2005; Boyer and Nicolas 2013).

We can therefore imagine that this minority group embodies – more so than for other fathers – models and representations of fathering skills and an equal division of parental duties. Having made a formal decision to balance their family and profes-

¹The CLCA can be paid out until the child is 3 years of age; this is a relatively long period compared to the situation of other fathers studied in the publication.

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Box 11.1: Part-Time Parental Leave and Partial Rate Child Rearing Benefit in France

Part-time parental leave is covered by French labour law, offering the parents of young children the right to temporarily reduce their professional activity until the third birthday of their youngest child. In order to benefit, the parent must be an employee, must have at least one child under the age of 3, and must have been working for their employer for at least a year at the time of the child's birth.

People on parental leave are not paid. Rather the French social protection system offers fathers and mothers a family benefit, the *Complément de libre choix d'activité* (CLCA), which is allocated provided that certain previous employment conditions are met. The partial rate CLCA is available for parents with children below the age of 3 who are working part-time. Its aim is to compensate, in part, for their decreased income.

For a first child, the partial rate CLCA can be received for 6 months, or until the child turns 3 years of age from the second child onwards.

The amount of partial rate CLCA is paid on flat rate basis and depends on the hours worked. At the time the survey was carried out, the value of the partial rate CLCA varied from:

- €247.98 to €430.40 per month if the parent works below 50 % (of full-time hours)
- €143.05 to €325.47 per month if the parent works between 50 % and 80 % of full-time.

Since 2004, a larger financial incentive to opt for the partial-rate CLCA encourages part-time work. As a result, partial-rate CLCA take-up has increased remarkably. Until 2003, the number of beneficiaries of partial-rate was stable – at around 134,000 recipients – just over 26 % of all recipients. From the end of 2003 to the end of 2010, the proportion of beneficiaries receiving the partial rate grew considerably, by 60 %, reaching 45 % in 2013.

Uptake of this benefit by men is still rare, with fathers making up only 3.7 % of the recipients.

There is a more frequent uptake by men of the partial-rate CLCA (71 % compared to 45 % for the mothers). In addition, 27 % of these fathers, compared to 1 % of the mothers, receive the allowance at the same time as their partners).

As part of a bill aiming at equality between men and woman, a reform of the CLCA was introduced on January 2015. Its objective was in particular to ensure a fairer division of the time mothers and fathers spend with their child (ren).

Breakdown of mothers and fathers receiving the CLCA different rates

| | Fathers | | Mothers | |
|----------------|---------|-----|---------|-----|
| | Staff | (%) | Staff | (%) |
| Clca full-time | 55515 | 29 | 283,569 | 55 |
| Clca part-time | 13,354 | 71 | 227085 | 45 |
| Ensemble | 18869 | 100 | 496455 | 100 |

Source: Observatoire national de la petite enfance (ONPE) 2012; **Field:** mothers and fathers receiving CLCA – France

sional lives, these individuals can provide insight into how they manage to do this on a daily basis. What are their experiences and what conjugal and parental ideals are these based on? During parental leave, has the division of household tasks and parental duties evolved? Has the way they see their fathering skills changed? Which aspects of behaviour do gender norms continue to exercise their influence? Finally, are we witnessing new types of attitudes to work and to commitment to family life?

11.2 Method and Sample

The research data was drawn from two data sources (see Box 11.2). The first source being the management file of the “Caisse Nationale d’Allocations Familiales” (the national family benefits fund).² This file includes individual data on fathers receiving the CLCA. In particular, it provides information on the number of fathers receiving the partial rate CLCA, their employment status, how long they receive the benefit for, their conjugal and family status and their socio-economic category – their income level in particular. The second data source is a qualitative survey carried out between December 2011 and April 2012 using semi-structured face-to-face interviews in the participants’ homes.³

Box 11.2: Methodology

The study is based on an analysis of the data concerning CLCA beneficiaries recorded by the CNAF, which is an exhaustive national file covering all beneficiaries. This analysis was conducted through face-to-face semi-structured interviews carried out from December 2011 to April 2012 with 25 fathers who receive the partial-rate CLCA, in their own homes, and from October 2013 to April 2014 with 25 mothers who also receive the partial-rate CLCA. These recipients all live with a partner and, given the conditions of this benefit, all have at least one child under the age of 3. They receive the 80 % partial-rate CLCA, i.e. they work 80 % of full-time hours (35 h per week in France). They have 1 day per week off work, usually Wednesday, which is a non-school day in France, in order to take care of their child (ren), for a duration which can start once the child is born and paternity leave has ended, up until the child reaches the age of 3. The interviews lasted between 40 min and 3 hours. In two cases, both partners were on part-time parental leave. In one of these cases, the father and mother were interviewed separately. In the other, at the couple’s request, the interview was carried out with both partners at the same time. Although these beneficiaries did not meet the exact requirements of our sample (with only the father or mother on parental leave), we still included them in the sample because the father in question spent his parental leave alone (by this we mean without his partner) with the children.

²The Family Division of the Social Security system.

³Except for four interviews which were conducted in cafés.

A sample of 25 fathers, who were receiving partial-rate CLCA, as part of a parental leave and working 80 % of full-time hours, were interviewed (Table 11.1). The decision to use such a finely targeted population was justified by its representativeness. Indeed, this is the most common situation among the fathers receiving the part-time CLCA : this category accounts for 86 % of the male beneficiaries of the

Table 11.1 Sample characteristics

| First Name | Job | Age | Job of partner | Number of children | How long the beneficiary had been receiving the CLCA at the time of the enquiry (expressed in months) |
|-------------|--|-----|--|--------------------|---|
| Fabien C | Engineer in the automotive industry, part-time 80 % | 34 | IT engineer full-time | 2 | 24 |
| Francois T | Oil company executive, partner part-time 80% | 42 | Accountant at the SNCF (national public transport company) full-time | 2 | 18 |
| Didier S | Economist at a private health insurance company part-time 80 % | 32 | National radio executive full-time | 1 | 3 |
| Etienne Z | Municipal employee, part-time 80 % | 40 | Municipal employee, full-time | 2 | 26 |
| Aurélien E | Special needs teacher part-time 80 % | 31 | Special needs teacher full-time | 2 | 7 |
| Vincent I | Accountant at a travel agency, part-time 80 % | 50 | Sales executive full-time | 4 | 11 |
| Arnaud H | Skilled worker at the <i>Imprimerie Nationale</i> , part-time 80 % | 37 | Head of sales, full-time | 2 | 22 |
| Rémi O | Bus driver region transport service part-time 80 % | 45 | Nurse in an Hospital full-time | 2 | 8 |
| Thomas M | Municipal employee part-time 80 % | 41 | Municipal employee part-time 80 % | 2 | 6 |
| Guillaume U | Gardener for the local authority part-time 80 % | 44 | Regional employee full-time | 2 | 9 |
| Jérôme R | Maintenance technician for Air France part-time 80 % | 49 | Military full-time | 3 | 27 |
| Florient L | Employee in the insurance sector part-time 80 % | 39 | Employee in a publishing house full-time | 2 | 6 |
| Pierre N | Car industry researcher, part-time 80 % | 37 | Secondary school teacher full-time | 2 | 18 |
| Martin P | Healthcare assistant, part-time 80 % | 55 | Special needs teacher full-time | 3 | 15 |
| Valentin B | Municipal employee part-time 80 % | 38 | Waitress full-time | 3 | 12 |
| Nicolas K | Secondary school teacher | 35 | University lecturer full-time | 3 | 24 |
| Frédéric Z | Accountant in private sector part-time 80 % | 37 | Government employee full-time | 1 | 3 |
| Stéphane Q | Regional executive part-time 80 % | 39 | Executive in the SNCF full-time | 2 | 15 |
| Antoine D | Family counsellor part-time 80 % | 35 | Social worker full-time | 2 | 15 |
| Laurent G | Printing technician part-time 80 % | 34 | Head of sales full-time | 1 | 1 |
| Olivier W | Servant part-time 80 % | 36 | Notary clerk full-time | 2 | 10 |
| Bruno V | Skilled labourer half-time | 54 | Skilled worker in a clothing factory half-time | 2 | 6 |
| Sébastien L | Engineering manager for a local authority | 46 | Project manager in the voluntary sector part-time 80 % | 2 | 12 |
| Alexandre J | Postman part-time 80 % | 50 | Manager in the banking sector Full-time | 3 | 5 |
| Bertrand F | Council employee | 33 | Archivist | 2 | 19 |

(continued)

Table 11.1 (continued)

| | | | | |
|---|----|--|---|----|
| employee in the insurance sector part-time 80 % | 39 | Employee in a publishing house full-time | 2 | 6 |
| car industry researcher, part-time 80 % | 37 | secondary school teacher full-time | 2 | 18 |
| healthcare assistant, part-time 80 % | 55 | 11.1 special needs teacher, full-time | 3 | 15 |
| municipal employee part-time 80 % | 38 | information officer full-time | 2 | 12 |
| secondary school teacher | 35 | university lecturer full-time | 3 | 24 |
| government employee part-time 80 % | 37 | artist full-time | 1 | 3 |
| job centre employee part-time 80 % | 39 | employee in the voluntary sector full-time | 2 | 15 |
| youth counsellor part-time 80 % | 35 | social worker full-time | 2 | 15 |
| school teacher part-time 80 % | 34 | school teacher full-time | 1 | 1 |
| senior civil servant part-time 80 % | 36 | notary clerk full-time | 2 | 10 |
| skilled labourer half-time | 54 | skilled worker in a clothing factory half-time | 2 | 6 |
| engineering manager for a local authority | 46 | project manager in the voluntary sector part-time 80 % | 2 | 12 |
| postman part-time 80 % | 50 | Manager in the banking sector Full-time | 3 | 5 |

part-time rate. For another, in order to produce a sample population that in theory subscribes to values of equality within the couple about parental duties and domestic tasks, we wanted to select fathers who chose to be on parental leave. With reference to the work of Jennifer Bué (2002) which differentiates between “elective” and “imposed” part-time work, it seemed to us that among the men receiving the partial-rate CLCA, those working 80 % of full-time hours were less likely to have had their reduced working hours imposed on them. We would therefore be looking at “elective” part-time work.

In 23 of the 25 cases, fathers were the sole recipients with their partner working full-time. In the two other cases, both partners received the partial-rate CLCA. In all of the cases, since the end of their paternity leave⁴ (approximately 2 weeks after the birth of a child) and the end of the maternity leave of their partner (approximately 6 weeks after the birth of a child), fathers spent at least one day alone (i.e. without their partner being present) with their last child less than 3 years old, equivalent to at least one working day per week, while their partners were at work. At the time of the survey, they had been in this situation for 3–77 month, receiving about 325 euros a month (Box 11.2). In all of the cases therefore, fathers are on parental leave with the receipt of child-rearing benefit (CLCA) linked to parental leave.

Additionally, between September 2013 and June 2014, we interviewed 25 mothers in the same situation (on parental leave, working 80 % of full-time hours, receiving reduce rate CLCA). What these women said was not analysed as such, but it did provide a “mirror” analysis of the two sets of answers and allowed us to accurately pinpoint the specific nature of practices and the position taken by the fathers. It also revealed the norms, to which men and women adhere, comply or contest.

The interviews concerned the organization of the day of parental leave and focused on the reasons for working part-time, including: conjugal and professional arrangements; daily life at work and at home; any difficulties encountered by fathers with their paternal, masculine role; the division of housework and parenting duties before and during the parental leave; and how this division was justified. An initial analysis reviewed the practices described above and the justifications given for the ways in which parenting duties and household tasks are allocated. A second analysis throws light on the question of norms and their associated representations. Some of these representations are openly referred to; some are presented as obvious facts. Others are more subtle and difficult to voice but nonetheless see the parents resorting to gender-based behaviour when parenting, ranging from explicit to complex.

11.3 Applying for Part-Time Parental Leave

Even though they represent the majority of male beneficiaries (70 %) the men studied are exceptional because they are part of the small group of fathers (1 in 100) who take parental leave and the 3.7 % of CLCA beneficiaries who are men. The professional setup they adopt when their child is born (reduced working hours, opting for a job compatible with family time, non-ascendant career paths) (Boyer 2013) brings their professional behaviour closer to that of women than men.⁵

⁴In France, the paternity leave and maternity leave are distinct from the parental leave.

⁵For example, after giving birth, 22 % of women reduce their working hours, compared to 6 % of men. (Pailhé, Solaz, 2006)

11.3.1 *Breaking Away from the Masculine Stereotype*

These men are also exceptional because of their reasons for choosing part-time employment. Indeed, research into part-time work among french men show that, not only is this type of working-time organisation rarely resorted to and when it is, it is rarely because the man wants to achieve a work-life balance. Over two thirds of men working part-time do so not out of choice but out of professional necessity, almost one third are looking for more work and only 7% opt for this for family reasons (Pax 2013). However, in our sample, all the men interviewed stated that they chose to work part-time. None of them work in “partial jobs” offered by the employer, but rather in “jobs with reduced hours”, as chosen by the employee (Bué 2002). For the men interviewed, these jobs offer 1 non-working day per week, most often on Wednesday,⁶ the day when French children do not attend school, often referred to as known as “Mums’ Day” in France.⁷

The subjects interviewed would appear to have detached themselves from the working world. Mr. C, for example, railed against the “omnipresence” of work: “I’m an engineer and engineers, managerial staff and part-time work, they just don’t go together! Whether you are a man or a woman, you are supposed to be present and put in your hours. But I don’t agree with this – if the work is done, there is no point in staying on any longer” (Fabien C, 34, engineer in the automotive industry, 34, partner IT engineer). Others, like Mr T. admit to the relatively low importance they give to work “Quite frankly I worry very little about work” (Francois T, Oil company executive, 42, accountant at the SNCF). They also admit to a sense of frustration because they have suffered setbacks in their careers. “So, I do it so as to keep a certain psychological balance (...)” (Didier S, economist at a private health insurance company, 32, partner national radio executive). It is their partner, who for the most part, has kept up an investment in a full-time professional occupation. Generally speaking, the situation is a life choice for the fathers of this study that takes shape and pushes working life into the background. “Personally, I find it healthier than spending all of my time at work” (Alexandre J, postman, 50, partner manager in the banking sector).

Their professional situation is often the result of careful career management. Men who at the start of their career found themselves in business sectors not geared towards work-life balance often changed position or department, without changing employers, in order to be able to work part-time: “I mean that if you want to work 80% you have to try to find a job that fits in with that because not all jobs can become part-time” (Guillaume, 44, gardener for the local authority, partner regional civil servant). This is also the case for Mr H, who moved from a

⁶Only two fathers had a different set-up : Friday off for one, and a variable day for the other.

⁷Due to the large number of female employees who take Wednesday off in order to take care of their child (ren).

department labelled “masculine” to another one, mostly composed of women: “When I was in operations it was not possible because phone calls and requests came in every day. If you are not there it’s very difficult to catch up, it’ll take you an hour to do what might have taken 5 min the previous day, so it would have been more difficult... Whereas now my role is less “front office” and this makes it easier to manage my time. (...) That’s why I changed: I was looking for a more administrative department. (...) Where I am now it is mostly women, about 70 % women. The department I was in before was mostly men. Now I am in purchasing, essentially administration.” (Arnaud H, skilled worker at the Imprimerie Nationale, 37, partner head of sales).

More globally, the way informants justify themselves would suggest that these men are starting to break away from masculine stereotypes. The fathers interviewed explained that their own “first family” background helped them get used to young children – and the logistics that looking after them involves – in a “*natural*” and uncontrived manner. Mr. S mentioned that his father had brought him up and then he in turn looked after his own brother.

When I was young... I must have been three, my parents split up and then my father looked after me (...) And because I was 13 years older than my brother – I was 13 when he was born – I looked after him when I was 14–15 years old. I looked after him quite a lot, I would go and pick him up at the day centre, and I would give him his bottle” (Didier S, economist at a private health insurance company, 32, partner manager in national radio.).

Family environment is considered to be a determining factor when it comes to their involvement as fathers. “I don’t mind holding a new-born baby because, well, I always had children around me” (Aurélien E, special needs teacher, 31, partner special needs teacher). The skills traditionally associated with gender are mentioned but subsequently dropped in the course of the conversation. For example, in answer to one of our questions on the sharing of parental tasks in a couple, Mr E. took a non-traditional position relating to gender-based social relations: “There are no strict demarcation lines (...) for male status (laughs), it’s a pseudo male status, etc.” (Laurent G, printing technician, 34, partner, head of sales). In the same way, this man shared his egalitarian vision of male-female relations: “I think that if we reconsidered our respective positions, if we tried to think out of the box sometimes, this would make relations more flexible and relaxed” (Etienne Z, municipal employee, 40, partner municipal employee).

11.3.2 Implementating Egalitarian Values

When we asked about how domestic and parenting tasks were allocated, the fathers met automatically described their relationships as being egalitarian. From fathers’ accounts, their participation does not seem to be confined to Wednesdays but

generalises to the rest of the week. For example one such father stated: “I do everything and she does everything” (Antoine D, family counsellor, 35, partner social worker). From the interviews, we get the impression that the men’s contribution to doing domestic and parental tasks comes naturally.

It goes without saying”, “it is normal” or “it is natural” is often heard.

For me it is something that I don’t make a big deal of, but it’s all part of it... it’s natural, again, normal to spend time tidying up or washing clothes or taking care of the cooking etc., doing the shopping etc. (Rémi O, bus driver, 45, partner hospital worker).

Very little mention is made of parents taking on specific tasks. It seems to come down to opportunity or habits more than any conjugal agreement. Likewise, Mr S. describes being responsible for the shopping because he has the opportunity to get it done during the week, rather than linked to a principle:

The shopping... well it’s rather... it’s true... on Wednesday I usually do some shopping, it’s convenient, the children like going for an outing and it’s a way of filling the day, so yes it is often me who does it during the week (...) it wasn’t really a formal decision though. (Olivier S, secondary school teacher, 36, partner notary clerk).

Couples state that their current system of household and parenting tasks has followed on from their egalitarian organisation prior to parental leave. For these men, reducing their work hours (all the fathers we met⁸ had worked full-time before receiving the CLCA) has not resulted in any change in their habits. The examples given mostly concern household tasks and few mention parenting duties. Mr J says:

It was like this before. Working part-time has allowed us to stabilise our system but it didn’t determine the division of labour. It was already like this. (...) I think that it’s mostly resulted in having more time to do things. We don’t have to wait till Saturday to do the shopping, so that’s something (Alexandre J, postman, 50, partner executive position in the banking sector).

The established organisation is presented as being sorted out on a day-to-day basis, ad hoc without prior discussion: “depending on the priorities and our availability and energy we both try to do our bit... We do what we can with this arrangement which is a bit... demanding” (laughter)” (Vincent I, accountant in a travel agency, 50, partner sales manager). Here, availability appears to be the determining factor in the division of labour “things happen ‘naturally’ depending on our availability” (Bertrand F, Council employee, 39, partner archivist, 2 children). “For the cooking, the cleaning, everything... we split things up depending on who is available” (Laurent G, printing technician, 34, partner head of sales).

⁸Excluding one, who had already started working part-time in order to reduce his workload and help ease organization.

Table 11.2 2011 annual professional income per partner, in families where the father was receiving the reduced-rate CLCA in December 2013

| Comparison of partners' incomes before receiving the reduced-rate CLCA | Beneficiary father |
|--|--------------------|
| Equal | 10 |
| Less | 55 |
| More | 34 |
| Unknown | 1 |
| Total | 100 |

Source: ONPE, 2012

Field: Reduced-rate CLCA beneficiary fathers, in December 2013 with positive professional income in 2011, with a child born in 2012 and with a partner who also had a positive professional income in 2011

Note: where the difference between the two partners' incomes does not exceed 5 %, we have considered their incomes to be equal

The average of the annual professional income of the fathers is 21.000 euros

11.3.3 A Conjugal and Pragmatic Arbitration

The practical aspect of the conjugal arrangement is presented as a decisive factor when making their choice. The comparison of the couples' respective workloads and whether or not they could be reduced, their respective salaries, their career development prospects, their position or grade in the company structure, or their employers' willingness to accept parental leave were all taken into consideration. The conclusion was that the father was the better contender for parental leave, but under different circumstances, it could have been the mother: "Well, Madam could not do it, so I got stuck with it!" (Jérôme R, maintenance technician for Air France, 49, partner military). A study conducted on the reference population of our sample showed that in the year preceding the birth of the child making them eligible for partial rate CLCA, fathers on the partial rate tend to earn less than their partners (Table 11.2), contrary to the average salary distribution in dual-income households.⁹ Fifty-five per cent of fathers receiving the partial rate earned less than their partners before receiving the CLCA. The fathers point out the financial dimension of the conjugal agreement about the fact that CLCA sometimes compensates the loss of income due to part-time activities and does for saving money on childcare costs.

An other reason expressed, is their "Privileged" working conditions comparing to the French men as a general rule. From the start of the interview, professional obsta-

⁹ We were unable to calculate the gap in income of the group of people entitled to payment. For this reason we chose to use INSEE data on a sample population of men and women from 20 to 59 living together. In 2011, among dual-income couples women contributed up to 40 % of the shared income (Morin 2014).

cles were frequently mentioned as being the greatest barrier to taking parental leave for the majority of the men, excepted for them :

The greatest obstacles do not come from the family or within the couple, they come from the professional side, that's quite clear for me. I have a friend who works for a smaller company, I am sure that he would have liked to do it but it would have been impossible. In any case I think that mentally he would have been prepared to do it." (Arnaud H, skilled worker at the *Imprimerie Nationale*, 37, partner head of sales).

Although they are entitled to take parental leave and by law the employer cannot refuse this (see Box 11.1), they consider the fact that their employer did not oppose their right to parental leave to be a "privilege": "I know that where I work we are privileged. My boss said, "Go for it! You have nothing to lose" (Etienne Z, municipal employee, 40, partner municipal employee). This "privilege" in certain cases can explained by existing gender equality employee agreements or specific workplace charters,¹⁰ by the fact that it is a traditionally female area of activity or one where career prospects are not subject to hierarchical approval.

Most of them point out that they were "lucky" not to have met these kinds of professional obstacles and to have got the go-ahead to work part-time very easily after a first request: "it went through very easily, no difficulties with my work. I made a request and it was accepted" (Francois T, Oil company executive, 42, accountant at the SNCF). Even when we ask the question again: "You didn't have any problems?" they re-affirm: "No I didn't... no problems with the hierarchy, no discrimination or anything like that. No, it wasn't a problem" (J rome, maintenance technician for Air France, 49, partner military).

11.4 A Day at Home Alone Taking Care of a Child

11.4.1 An Ideal Condition for Early Childhood Socialisation

For fathers we met, the child appears to be at the centre of the decision.¹¹ Time off work is dedicated to the child "it's a day for him" (Arnaud H, skilled worker at the *Imprimerie Nationale*, 37, partner head of sales). Family values and in particular the idea that the child does better within the family unit are presented as the main reasons behind the decision to work part-time. Most of the fathers questioned point out that their goal is to give priority to the quality of life of their children. "Objective number one – his life, for him to stay at home as much as possible" (Fr d ric A, accountant in private sector, 37, partner government employee). The importance placed on parental care during the first years to provide for the child's well-being, development and balance is often mentioned. "Initially it was to avoid putting him

¹⁰This allows them, for example, to be paid at more than 80%.

¹¹Only 3 of the fathers questioned point out that their decision is not primarily linked to the child and develop arguments around extra professional activities or tiredness due to work).

in full-time daycare and so for us to take care of him” (Thomas, municipal officer, 41, partner municipal officer).

Nevertheless, aiming to socialise the child outside of the family is always mentioned too. Parental leave is never seen as the exclusive form of childcare: “A child has to meet people, other than their family” (Aurélien H, special needs teacher, partner is a regional civil servant). In the majority of study cases, the day of parental leave is Wednesday, a day without school in France. The father’s day for childcare is always arranged with a daycare centre or with a child-minder. For most of the families we met, the child was in non-family care 4 days a week.¹² In this co-education model, the family is presented as the natural and irreplaceable custodian of family values: “The values I want to transmit are the importance of family” (Rémi O, bus driver, 45, partner hospital worker). Family life is organised around the child, with the couple taking a backseat. The parents’ life as a couple is rarely mentioned by the fathers and outings as a couple, when they happen, include the children. Conjugal time is merged with parenting time “Actually we always talked about what we wanted for our family, if one day we had children, when we had children we wanted to free up time for them... if we go out it is with them...” (Thomas M, municipal officer, 41, partner municipal officer).

This investment in family time is not presented as a temporary break in their family and professional life, but more as a commitment towards their child that they wish to honour and pursue. They all plan to remain on parental leave for the maximum time available to them, i.e. until the last child is 3 years old. They consider extending this arrangement at least until the child starts pre-primary school or some time primary school (until the last child is 6 years old). Many state their satisfaction with their active involvement in parental duties and the personal interaction and emotional closeness with the child that this entails. Mr N. proudly describes his close bonds with his children and likes to point out the special relationship he has with his sons: “The bond we can create when they are little, I mean for me, when they wake up at night it’s just that it’s Dad they call for... take that anyway you like...” (Pierre N, car industry researcher, 37, partner secondary school teacher).

The prospect of having to end the parental leave is described as being personally painful.” It is something we’ll have to think about...” (Florient L, employee in the insurance sector, 39, partner employee in a publishing house)

11.4.2 Interiorization of Daily Domestic Life – Over-Identification with the Feminine Role

Contrary to their feminine counterparts, fathers rarely complain that their day off for parental leave adds to their parental responsibilities or results in an unfair division of household tasks as far as they are concerned. Most of them are happy with their current organisation. Only two of them state that because they are at home more

¹²For 4 of the fathers we met, the paternal parental leave day is supplemented by maternal parental leave day (another day of the week) and 3 days of extra-family care (childminder, crèches).

often than their partners, the latter is not very involved, even insufficiently involved in domestic matters up to the point of ignoring them: “I do practically everything in the house, and because I am there a little more than she is ... to be honest, my wife does very little ... she leaves it up to me” (Martin P, healthcare assistant, 55, partner special needs teacher). Here we can see the importance that the daily routine takes on and its gradual impact on the sustainability of the system. Mr K. describes this very well when he mentions an annoying habit of his partner – not warning him about schedule changes which then upsets the balance of the family organisation and, what is more, shows a lack of consideration for his work at home:

Because I’m at home... well you see there have been times when I didn’t know what time she was coming back... whether I should go and pick up the children or not... Because I’m at home she thinks I’m available... She doesn’t understand why everything hasn’t been done... Working at home is tough ... a lot of things to be done ... (Nicolas K, secondary school teacher, 35, partner University Lecturer).

Parental leave can also lead to other forms of interiorisation of certain aspects of daily domestic life. One such example is over-identifying with the “fair sex” and its tendency to set high standards for oneself (Chatot 2014). This is the case when Mr F. talks about his decision to take sole responsibility for cleaning the kitchen. Far from seeing this as an unequal division of labour, he seems to have claimed his territory and does not wish to share it. This man has been affected by “irresistible household integration” (Kaufmann 1992), which usually leads women to raise their standards, more than men tend to, in order to reach the traditional ideal of the home: he has acquired a “female” compulsion. “Well in terms of the division of labour... I do the kitchen, the cleaning in general is 50/50, but I do all the kitchen cleaning. It’s MY kitchen.” (Bertrand F, Council employee, 34, partner archivist).

11.4.3 *Psychologically Taxing*

The way the fathers describe the day alternates between “it goes by very fast” and “we have to find things to fill the time”. One day seems to run into another and it’s just the routine, nothing extraordinary:

I try to get her to eat her lunch which is not so easy... to dress her... I tidy the house, I clean, depending on the day. Depending on the weather we’ll go for an outing... in winter we didn’t do it much but now we’ll start going out till it’s time to come back for food. He sleeps a lot, I’m lucky... he sleeps until 4 pm, we even have to wake him up... the rest of the afternoon, depending on the weather, we either go out or stay at home and play together... there is TV as well... he’s 2 now and has discovered TV and he watches the cartoons for an hour and a half. He is very focused and keen on them. (Martin P, Healthcare assistant, 55, partner special needs teacher).

The tiring or even exhausting nature of the days is often pointed out, for example by Mr D when talking about the attention required for looking after children: “taking care of a child, oh, it is tiring... yes, the days are exhausting”. Attempts to accomplish other tasks and chores, both personal and professional are difficult or unsuccessful, and frequently mentioned in the interviews:

I put her in her little play area; I play with her a bit. Well, how to describe it? I set her up with a game... then I don't know, it lasts 10 minutes, a quarter of an hour. And then I try to cook or tidy up, do some washing up, I don't know – there always is something to do... Then in the meantime, if you leave her alone for more than a quarter of an hour she calls out so you have to go and see... you have to play with her a bit, and then go again... it's exhausting. I think that's what's difficult... Sometimes I try to look at my e-mails, or job offers, the news, little things... things which take less than a quarter of an hour (Sébastien L, local authority manager, 46, partner manager in the private sector, 2 children).

The fathers often stress the fact that they feel isolated. The phrases “stuck in the house”, or “afraid of losing social skills”, or even “it's impossible to do anything else” are uttered by most of them, even several times during the interview. The lack of contact with the outside world during their childcare experience is often brought up.

But it is especially the burden of the responsibility they take which is more frequently expressed by the men than by their female counterparts. Mr C expresses his anxiety at the prospect of having to deal with potential difficulties, especially because during his day at home, his wife has a tendency to stay longer at work.

Well because of how little time she spends here. It's simple, she leaves at 8 am and comes back at 7.30–8 pm. I can't delegate tasks and recently I was looking after the two of them in the morning and two in the evening... There was no one I could call on for help if ever... It was very problematic. (Didier S, economist at a private health insurance company, 32, partner national radio executive)

11.4.4 “Spontaneous” Paternal Contributions

They have also plenty to say about how they join in with games and play with their children. This is frequently mentioned, and often as being specific to the father. For example, Mr B mentions his “typically” paternal skill of “knowing how to play”:

I think that, even though it might seem quite a caricature, my wife is very involved with organising things... she is less involved in play... I'm more present when it comes to playing; I spend more time playing games with them (Valentin B, municipal employee, 38, partner waitress).

Although they suggest that their play activities with the children have a regular schedule, always at the same time and integrated into a set timetable (usually between the nap and the afternoon snack), these activities are presented as being unplanned, not very organised, and spontaneous: “I'm more about the here-and-now, yes. More about having fun together” (Sébastien L, local engineering executive engineering, 46, partner project manager in the voluntary sector). Some fathers even describe themselves as a “playmate”, without placing any educational or early-learning emphasis on the activities. This is the case for Mr C., who describes having fun with, and alongside, his 2 sons: “besides, they are boys (...) so it's something we can really share. We play with the remote controlled car, building games, Lego, things that I enjoyed as a kid and so it's something we have in common” (Fabien C, 34, engineer in the automotive industry, 34, partner IT engineer).

Besides, while the mothers express often from the beginning of the interview their personal desire to take care of the child, and tell the unilateral character of the decision “I’ve imposed, that’s all” the fathers rarely mention their desire and present their decision as being inseparable of the agreement of their spouses. For some of them, the request comes even from her “it is her, it is my wife who thought of it, in fact it’s my wife who asked me for it” (Aurélien E, special need teacher, 31, partner special need teacher).

Here we have glimpses of how the internalisation of the importance given to the actions of the mother and the comparative lack of importance of the father playing any educational role relies on representations of gendered roles. The mothers are seen as professionals, with abilities similar to those of early-year childcare professionals: “when the professional (woman) plays with a child, she is not actually playing but she is allowing the child to play and to experiment through its own actions” (Ulman 2014).

11.5 Compromising with Prescriptive Influences

Even when the husband is on parental leave at home, partners, who have undoubtedly internalised higher expectations in terms of tidiness and cleanliness, but also ideas on childcare, leave little room for manoeuvre. They anticipate and plan ahead.

11.5.1 *Contributing According to Availability*

More often than not it is the wives who run the family organisation, preparing the children’s clothes in the morning, writing shopping lists, and taking sole responsibility for certain tasks, such as bathing the children, as the following interview extract illustrates (Box 11.3).

Mr V is on part-time parental leave, as is his wife. The time they spend with their child is equal, one at the start of the week and the other at the end, which one assumes would be conducive to an equal division. Despite not fitting the survey protocol, Mr and Mrs V were interviewed together, a pre-requisite they set because “in any case, we’ll say the same things.” Mrs V replied first to most of the questions, with her husband sometimes adding to what she said. Despite agreeing on the idea that they “share everything”, their accounts not only reveal that this sharing process is not in fact taking place, but above all that the reality fits with a socially gendered vision of duties, although this does not lead them to question whether they are an equal couple. Their behaviour is less about seeking equality than it is about seeking to share. Comparing Mrs V’s first sentence, “we’ve always done that: shared”, with Mr V’s last sentence about his participation, “clearing the table, that’s all”, reveals how the egalitarian model constantly referred to by Mrs V is not in fact reflected in the practice described by Mr V. The extract also shows that, for this couple, the

Box 11.3: Extract of Interview with Mr and Mrs V, Both Skilled Workers, Two Children

Mrs. V: we've always done that: shared

Mr. V: for the older child, even though she has a nanny, we've always done that

Mrs. V: always

Interviewer: have you always been a very equal couple?

Mrs. V: oh yes

Interviewer: so you do the same chores? You share everything?

Mr. V: um... no, I don't share everything

Interviewer: yes

Mr. V: when it comes to bath time... or doing her nostrils every day, I do do it... but...

Mrs. V: (*knowingly to the interviewer*): he's less comfortable with it

Mr. V: that's it, I'm less comfortable with it... and for baths, I wouldn't bathe her

Interviewer: oh really, why?

Mr. V: for a start I bathed her right in the bath tub, well, and then there's the little seat... but it's true that I'm not comfortable with it

Mrs. V: but he does help, because to rinse you do always need...

Interviewer: and apart from the bath?

Mr. V: no

Mrs. V: No because he takes her to the doctor if I can't... no, I can't think of what else... because when I'm not here you do take care of it... No apart from that, there's just the bath thing

(.....)

Interviewer: and household tasks?

Mrs. V: oh well I have my work cut out... sometimes, there's laundry to gather up and to put into the machine

Mr. V: putting a load of washing on, hanging it out to dry

Interviewer: ah right, so you do...?

Mr. V: I do do it, but...

Mrs. V: but he won't do it of his own accord, he needs to be told... if I tell him...

Mr. V: I'm never the one who does the household tasks... cleaning, pfff

Mrs. V: apart from sweeping

Mr. V: could sweep, yes, um taking the edge off it, just getting started. But I do do the washing up

Mrs. V: we've got the dishwasher now

Mr. V: clearing the table, that's all

egalitarian model has to do with “also doing things” or “doing things together”. This arrangement with the prescriptive influences weighing on men and women shows the success of an ideal which transcends the obstacles of equality: sharing. This moral value allows everyone to contribute according to their availability, to accept that their availability is limited, and to gain more satisfaction (Chatot 2014).

11.5.2 Making Up for the Mother’s Lack of Availability

The notion that fathers are by nature naturally less well versed in the art of parenting is said to influence the decision as to which parent will eventually stay at home. Choosing the father is seen as a solution that will provide him with hands-on experience and will also establish his status as a father. This latter point is confirmed by the following statement by Mr A:

The question of who would look after Thimoté... came up ... one or two days a week, and ... and I think the solution my wife C. and I came up with was because... OK, like it’s going to be you because she’s the mother and obviously she has a stronger bond with Thimoté... She thought it would be better if I took a 80 % part-time to look after him during the week (Laurent G, printing technician, 34, partner, head of sales).

The importance of the biological aspect when building a parental bond is also mentioned. The fact that women are already engaged in motherhood during pregnancy, gives them “a feel” for their own capabilities, with their ability to give birth serving as an type of endorsement of their ability to become mothers. Mr C talks of his need to take time to discover fatherhood, which seems to him less natural than motherhood:

For men, it’s spending time with the children that allows you to understand it, I think, I say this often but you’re not born a father, you become a dad through outside influences, unlike mothers, who carry the baby and who... we become fathers when we hold our child for the first time and start to live with our child... so we become dads and discover our child’s wants and needs, spending time with him or her ((Fabien C, 34, engineer in the automotive industry, 34, partner IT engineer).

Maternal exclusivity is also seen through the way things are organised, even if it is suggested that this organisation takes place on a day-by-day basis, depending on the partners’ availabilities. Despite the increased time the fathers spend at home, it is the mother’s availability, which determines how tasks are divided up. The tasks that the fathers take on are often contained within their day of parental leave. “It’s Wednesday for me, it takes some of the load off Martine (wife) for shopping...” (Jérôme R, maintenance technician for Air France, 49, partner military). This quotation also shows that time invested is considered a way of “taking the load off” the mother. The following quotation shows that for this other father, the division of labour (in this case washing clothes) has more to do with occasional, one-off forays into tasks otherwise allotted to women:

Washing the clothes... um... 70% Catherine (wife), 30% me; so basically on Wednesdays if I notice there's a load of nappies to wash, or clothes that need doing, then yes. I did a load of washing this morning as well, to lend a hand, I do washing but generally Catherine does it (Pierre N, car industry researcher, 37, partner secondary school teacher).

Using a joking tone, and underlining his wife's "typically" feminine ability to wake up in the morning, this other father mentions that his role is just a stand-in one:

It starts, the day starts at 7 o'clock. Usually in the morning it's Dominique (wife) who gives her the bottle... that's because she's better at waking up than me (laughter) I take a little while to surface... she (the child) starts crying straight away, so if we don't want her to wake her sister up, we need to get on it straight away. Apart from when she travels with work, then I do it... so that's clear (Sébastien L, Regional Engineering Executive, 46, partner project manager in the voluntary sector).

Like most of the fathers in the study, he goes on to say that he dresses his children every morning, but rarely chooses their clothes, in order to meet his wife's wishes. These gendered principles for allocating this task reveal how strong gendered cultural norms are. In this instance the justification of pleasing the mother is given: "yeah yeah, well often it's also Dominique who chooses them (the clothes), because she likes giving them little things".

11.5.3 Showing His Commitment to Employment

Even though the fathers of this study seem different to other men in that they work part-time and therefore adhere less than most men to the social pressure to "be present" at work, they do still place importance on the role that work plays in their lives. They underline the intellectual aspect of the organisational side of their work, or consider their workload to be that of a full-time job, as does Mr H:

The most interesting thing is that working 80% of the time is starting not to mean doing 80% of the workload. Because I clearly don't have a decreased workload. My boss's approach is that I can organise my time how I like, but I have the same workload as the others. (Arnaud H, skilled worker at the Imprimerie Nationale, 37, partner head of sales).

One of the fathers interviewed jokes about stopping work: "Well I wouldn't mind giving up work all together... But my wife doesn't earn enough for me to do that [laughter]" (Alexandre J, postman, 50, partner manager in the banking sector). Other than that, all the statements underline the almost inseparable link between masculine identity and professional work. All the fathers interviewed said that they could not imagine giving up work entirely. Some of them because they could not imagine spending all of their time parenting: "Give up work entirely? No... Spend all my time parenting? No." (Aurélien E, special needs teacher, 48, partner regional manager,). Others because they feel an innate need to work "you need to go to work" (Guillaume U, gardener for the local authority, 44, partner regional civil servant). Others still point out that it would have too big an impact on their professional career:

Give up work completely? I don't know, it would change a lot. If I left the system for two years, I think it'd be a huge shock to return to work after. It must be hard to get used to it again... It's probably something you could do if you work on a till. Right now I have a very good job and position, and I really wouldn't want to lose it. We don't want to take too many risks.. (Fabien C, 34, engineer in the automotive industry, 34, partner IT engineer)

They all have career objectives in mind and believe that they will need to return to full-time work in order to achieve them: "I'm planning to change departments... I'll go back to working full-time because changing jobs while you're part-time isn't really possible" (Economist at an centre, wife national radio station manager, one child). They mention what they believe to be the norm in terms of commitment to work, and count themselves amongst those employees less invested in their work: "In any case, I think someone who thinks about spending more time with their children... isn't completely immersed in their work" (Fabien C, 34, engineer in the automotive industry, 34, partner IT engineer).

The fathers' reduced working hours seem to them to deviate from the norm, and are a little "borderline" in terms of what employers would accept:

Working even fewer hours? No, that's not possible. I'm already working as few hours as is professionally acceptable, I don't think I could reduce my hours further... Yet I do get in early in the morning, and I leave at 5 pm, I work long hours, but I can't see myself leaving my desk at 4 pm. There are certain limits... That would be a provocation – I wouldn't do that! [laughter]" (Arnaud H, skilled worker at the Imprimerie Nationale, 37, partner head of sales).

11.5.4 Normative Expectations Attached to Fatherhood

Most of the fathers say that their parental leave experience lead to a re-examination of norms concerning a man's place and his involvement with work and family. However, the "interiorised model of the parental bond" (Neyrand 2000) based on the premise of maternal exclusivity makes it difficult for fathers to legitimise their position. Instead there is a degree of compromise as shown from the following account of a "reality check" about masculine transgression.

Sometimes I do think to myself that my role isn't "masculine", so to speak, when I need to do washing, or it's bath time... changing nappies and all that... It is something I think to myself occasionally... but there isn't... I tell myself no, that's nonsense, that's got nothing to do with it, it's not a role specific to men or women, it's a role specific to parents, that's all" (Valentin B, municipal employee, 38, partner Waitress)

At work, in line with the behaviour of other fathers at work, who tend to play down, or even hide, the level of their parental involvement (Gregory and Milner 2004), the men we interviewed said they did not say much about it at work.

My colleagues? No, I don't think they know... They do know that if they want to have a meeting on Wednesday, we're never there for example. So in the end you'll say to them

“stop planning meetings on Wednesdays: I don’t work Wednesdays”... But beyond that, people don’t necessarily know (Rémi O, bus driver, 45, partner hospital worker).

They talk about having authorised flexibility at work, like having time off in lieu or flexi-time, which allows them to pass off their hours as being unrelated to parenting: “For work, it kind of “goes unnoticed”. I’m independent in my position, and with time off in lieu and all that, it goes unnoticed...” (Martin P, healthcare assistant, 55, partner special needs teacher). These men don’t justify the way they have chosen to organise their time with “finding a work-life balance”, rather they try to make their choice invisible. For them, 1 day per week is the most appropriate set-up in the eyes of their colleagues and employer: “One day away from work is the most readily accepted, even if it works out the same in the end, and the hours worked are exactly the same... But you do need to bear any sensitivities in mind...” (Pierre N, car industry researcher, 37, partner secondary school teacher).

So, even if they present their type of involvement as “normal” or as going against the usual masculine models: “Not all men are the same, I don’t watch football, I’d rather watch a cartoon with my daughter than a football match for example, so I don’t mind at all, really not at all” (Rémi O, bus driver, 45, partner hospital worker), they are aware of their difference, or feel separate when they speak about their unusual situations from the start of the interview: “I’m part of that group of men”, and point out their participation in traditionally masculine activities. It’s like that of this father for whom it is crucial to be seen as more than just someone who participates in household and parental tasks: “Well I have to tell you that I do a lot of things on the side; charity work” (Thomas, municipal officer, 41, partner municipal officer), and this other father feels the need to point out that the time he gains by working a day less per week is spent not only looking after children, but also doing at home: “it’s true that having an extra day free per week is fantastic... but there are other motivations too – it has become a vocation for me” (Fabien C, 34, engineer in the automotive industry, 34, partner IT engineer).

11.6 Conclusion

This study of French fathers taking part-time parental leave shows the complex manner in which they display commitment to family life and negotiate the surrounding culture of normative masculinity. The experience of parental leave being confined to 1 day a week, seems to offer a new model of French fatherhood summarized in the following words : “I think it’s good to have a mix of work and time for the children” (Pierre N, car industry researcher, 37, partner secondary school teacher). It gives fathers the possibility to spend time with their child(ren), to establish strong emotional bonds, to share domestic and parental responsibility with their partners and to maintain a professional activity.

However, it seems difficult for couples to establish a system of equal male/female participation and some contradictions appear. The decision-making process behind the division of tasks is still strongly driven by traditional gender and familial norms, in particular, an assumption of mother-child primacy. This cultural norm creates in fathers a sense of not being fully “legitimate” when it comes to nurturing and bringing up their own children and a “learner” or stand-in status with regard to their spouse. Contradictions were also found in the workplace where some kept a low profile about parenting responsibilities and in public areas, such as play areas and parks, where they experienced an outsider status. This study suggests that couples with prescriptive influences more than clash with normative masculine and feminine attributes. Part-time parental leave would allow a reasonable deviation from fathers’ prescriptive models.

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