

# Chapter 14

## Discussion and Conclusions

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### 14.1 The Complex and Plural Nature of Change

There have been profound changes in leave policies and in the position of men in families and gender relations in the eleven countries examined in this book. However, change is surprisingly recent, even in countries with a long commitment to gender equality. Throughout most of the post-war 20<sup>th</sup> Century, entitlement to leave was only for mothers, seen as the primary and natural caregivers even when they took up full-time jobs (Kamerman and Moss 2009). For example, Swedish mothers' right to transfer maternity leave to fathers was granted in 1974, but entitlement to individual non-transferable leave was only introduced in the mid-1990s (1995), while access to leave for English fathers, beyond the 2-week paid paternity leave, is still today only possible through a transfer from mother to father (Baird and O'Brien 2015; Eydal et al. 2015). Overall, then, we might say that there has been some caution, in all developed countries, in promoting fast and radical reforms in parental leave architecture based on paid maternity leave.

Much of the explanation for cautious and drawn-out reform lies with historical and institutional pathways. As life course and sociological perspectives have pointed out, major institutions such as the family, the labour market and the welfare system strongly shape the fabric and pace of transformation by providing opportunities for both regularities and discontinuities. Institutional path dependency creates specific contingencies for welfare reform, social and biographical change and individual agency.

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An important example of institutional path dependency is the male breadwinner model and the continued frictions between gender, family and the employment system in different welfare regimes. As much of the literature points out, the unravelling of the male breadwinner/female carer model towards more egalitarian models of work-family articulation has been a complex and slow process (Crompton et al. 2007). There is no doubt that the growth in the labour force participation of women and the national policy responses to support dual earner families, especially leave policies and early childhood services, have been associated with changes in attitudes and behaviours. Societal expectations and the new practices of fathers underline the growing involvement of men in caring for a new-born child and in unpaid work in general (O'Brien 2009). And individual entitlement to parental leave for fathers clearly provides a framework encouraging men's assumption of full responsibility for the care of children. However, the contributors to this book show that changes are occurring in different ways and at different rates both between countries and also within countries and within institutions, influenced by a plurality of factors. Policy, normative (gender and family cultural models), lifecourse and workplace variables are highlighted as the main shaping factors of fathers' use and experiences of leave and solo caring.

At the policy level, the continuity and coherence of policy measures over many years and the specific nature of leave entitlements for fathers may be seen to influence the pathways and experiences of fathers' leave alone. The contributions to this book show that policies take time to be incorporated into attitudes, decision-making and behaviour. In policy contexts where the individual, fully-compensated and non-transferable so-called "daddy months" have been in place for some time (e.g. Norway, Sweden, Iceland, Finland and Canada to a lesser extent), research findings show that father's use of leave alone for 2 or 3 months tends to be more "taken-for-granted", a "normal" decision both in families and in the workplace. Families, colleagues, friends and employers tend to not question or wrangle over father's use of leave for the period allotted to them. However, when leave use goes beyond the stipulated leave period, fathers in these countries may also face work penalties or find themselves negotiating some availability to work in exchange for longer leave (cf. Chapters on Sweden, Finland, Canada). In other words, even in countries with longstanding policies in the field of gender neutral leave there continues to be a gap between the social acceptance of some full-time leave for fathers (e.g. an unequal model of leave sharing) and the idea of a gender equitable model of leave sharing.

In contrast, in contexts where similar policy measures were introduced more recently, with a gradual recognition of men's individual entitlement to full-time parental leave (e.g. Portugal, Spain), the first "forerunner" fathers to take up leave in a home alone manner have had to assert their rights, to deal with some employers' initial "surprise" and, in many cases, to negotiate their use of leave by committing to some availability to work or by accepting to be absent for less time than initially planned. In spite of new attitudes to fathers' involvement in the care of a baby, normative change takes time, especially in respect of fathers' capacity and right to primary full-time caregiving, on a par with the mother. In fact, the reaction of some employers, when legal entitlement is first introduced, is to consider men's take-up

of full-time leave, beyond the usual period of paternity leave immediately after the birth of the child, as a personal “option” rather than a taken-for-granted individual entitlement to work-family balance. Acceptance tends to be faster and more neutral in public and female-dominated workplaces and legal protection provides an important framework for negotiation in more adverse work environments.

Finally, in a third set of countries, where statutory, well-paid, non-transferable rights to full-time parental leave do not exist (e.g. Switzerland, UK, France) and where cultural and labour market contexts tend to favour the long-hour male breadwinner model (e.g. Japan), the very rare fathers trying to share part of the leave find it even harder. It is not only the initial barriers to leave that have to be overcome but also the censorial attitudes and the social isolation associated with a practice that is not endorsed explicitly or, in some instances, legally by society. Rather than mere forerunners, these fathers are described in this book as “pioneer” figures with a “frontier spirit”. Leave can come at a heavy price, both personally (isolation) and socially (social stigma, severe work penalties, having to “play down” parental involvement) and is therefore easier to take up for fathers who are highly qualified, can rely on significant educational and financial resources, whose wives invest in their jobs/career, or that have work environments that for some reason (e.g. generous company-based entitlements) provide more openings for fathers’ work-family balance.

The variations in fathers’ parental leave entitlements and arrangements add to the complexity of policy impact on fathers’ experiences of leave alone. In the studies reported in this book (with the exception of France) fathers took at least thirty days of full-time leave in a ‘home alone’ manner when the mother returns to work. Even with this criterion, however, there is some diversity in respect of the nature and use of leave across and within the different national contexts. For example, the duration and the type of leave entitlement seem to impact on the experiences and nature of father’s involvement. Being on leave for 1 month full-time when the mother returns to work may be a different experience from taking leave for 2 or more months or the same number of months as the mother; and having an individual non-transferable right to parental leave is different from being on leave through a maternal transfer of leave. Although a systematic comparison between fathers who took less and those who took many months of leave is not carried out in this book, several contributions suggest that taking a longer period of leave, beyond 1 or 2 months, impacts strongly both on the experience of leave (e.g. identifying, rather than just sympathizing, with mothers who take long stay-at-home periods of leave) and the negotiation of parental roles (e.g. more confidence and assertiveness with regard to equal and individualized parenting routines, cf. chapters on Norway, Quebec, Portugal). On the other hand, when leave design is based on maternal transfer of leave and there is weak formal institutional support, leave can be experienced as a “gift” offered by the mother (cf. Chapter on UK), thereby underlining an implicit understanding of parental leave as a maternal entitlement and the naturalness of women taking paramount responsibility for the care of young children.

The normative context, especially in respect of gender roles in work and family, thus interacts with the policy environment in shaping the perceptions and experi-

ences of fathers on leave alone (cf. Chap. 1). Gender may be defined as “the division of people into two differentiated groups, ‘men’ and ‘women’, and the organization of the major aspects of society along these binaries” (Davis et al. 2006: 55). Gender cultural models related to work-family balance have shifted over the last few decades and become more pluralized (Aboim 2010; Pfau-Effinger 2004) but attachment to the male-breadwinner/female-carer model has not disappeared and still represents a minority pattern even in countries with the most egalitarian policies (Wall 2007). Sustained across many contemporary normative and institutional contexts, it influences workplace support and barriers, as mentioned above, as well as mothers’ and fathers’ perceptions of gender roles in the care of young children. Change is uneven. The take-up of parental leave is gendered in all the countries examined in this book, but less so in the countries where policies and debate have focused strongly on gender equality in parental roles. Interestingly, in countries where policy changes have occurred over the last decade, advocacy and public debate on gender norms, and not just legal protection, have also had an important impact: for example, activism and societal debate on gender equality in Quebec seem to have allowed for an easier and more rapid acceptance of fathers’ take-up of leave alone since 2006 compared to the Portuguese case, where father’s individual non-transferable rights were introduced in 2009 in the absence of an intense societal debate.

Contributions in this book also point to diversity and unevenness in change across families and life paths. Some fathers still perceive themselves as the main economic provider or feel that they are expected to be more highly invested and successful in their career and in salary advancement, even in families and contexts where the full-time dual-earner model is predominant. These fathers usually seek to be involved in full-time parental leave as secondary caregivers, who are more “dependent” on female mediation and support despite taking on full-time caring responsibilities, a profile which emerges in several of the qualitative studies in this book, alongside the more independent or egalitarian profiles of fathers on leave alone. In other cases, it is the perceptions of men and women’s skills, preferences and vocation to care as different that underlie the narrative of more dependent solo caregiving. Many of the reported interviews show that these are issues under debate within couples. Biological differences, especially breastfeeding, and a belief in mothers’ caregiving by instinct, as opposed to fathers’ caregiving by acquirement of skills, often raise doubts and questionings, also making for possible hesitations and unevenness in fathers’ agency in negotiating parental roles.

As studies in this book and others have shown, couples who are more oriented to gender equality in work and family at the outset tend to be more receptive to gender neutral leave and equal parenting. Expectations of parity and “fairness” in conjugality and parenthood opens the way for decision-making and fathers’ take-up of leave as well as reducing qualms and scruples about a weakening of female mediation and possible power conflicts between the parents. In national contexts where legal entitlement is not explicit or is based on maternal transfer, these egalitarian-oriented couples or fathers are also those who are more likely to decide to overcome legal and financial barriers in order to implement the sharing of parental leave (cf. UK,

Switzerland, Japan, France). Men who are more weakly invested in or demoralized in relation to their jobs may also be motivated to take up full-time responsibility for childcare, even if compensation is low, and to privilege the strengthening of father-child bonds in relation to work (cf. Switzerland).

On the other hand, when there is explicit legal support for fathers' leave, there is a wide range of motivations that drive fathers to share parental leave, thereby making for more potential diversity in terms of pathways into solo caring. Beyond the strengthening of co-parenting and father-child relationships, the qualitative studies in this book highlight the following motivations: concerns related to the mother's work/career or allowing her to return to work earlier or to take up a job; the awareness of babyhood (first year of life) as a crucial and unique life-stage for father involvement that cannot be postponed; the need or wish to ensure the care of the child at home for a few more months (e.g. no crèche immediately available, parental care considered as better for a small child and to be prolonged in case of institutional support). Previous life transitions and events also emerge as drivers: fathers who had positive care experiences during paternity leave, after the birth of another child, or during earlier life stages (e.g. caring for a younger sibling) often reveal strong motivations to experience leave as a time of opportunity. In contrast, highly invested professional men taking leave at a life stage when their career is not yet consolidated tend to reveal less confidence in sharing parental leave on an equal basis. Fathering may therefore be seen as a process which occurs over time, making for heterogeneity in leave motivations and experiences.

This diversity of drivers means that the introduction of new policies in some countries is reaching out not only to men who are expecting to become highly involved parents and solo carers but also to some fathers who do not see themselves as equal sharers or primary caregivers at the outset. Experience of leave alone will not necessarily then always be the same, depending strongly on the couples' and the fathers' motivations, their socio-economic position and previous work and life trajectories as well as the fathers' capacity and agency in becoming independent carers and setting up individualized routines.

Lastly, at the workplace level, many organizations are changing to support dual-earner couples and father's leave in response to national policies or by introducing 'family-friendly' policies within the organization (Den Dulk 2001; Haas and Hwang 2009). Here, too, change is uneven. The male model of full-time, long-term dedication to work, based on assumptions of gendered work and family spheres (Lewis 2001), often prevails and may even be intensified in contemporary settings of increased work demands, unemployment and economic austerity. Nevertheless, some workplaces are clearly more supportive of father's leave than others. Supportiveness differs across sector, specific type of workplace, workplace units and for different occupations. Public and female-dominated workplaces, as shown in other studies, continue on the whole to be more supportive. But the qualitative studies reported in this book also demonstrate that there are may be differences in work units and in managers' attitudes as well as differences related to the leverage which some men can bring to bear on their colleagues and managers, both in private and in public sectors. In this respect, highly qualified men in very different national

contexts (e.g. Chapters on UK, Japan, Switzerland, Portugal) tend to emerge as more assertive in pulling their weight, in particular when they have been highly committed to their jobs and careers in the past.

Thus the contributions to this book illustrate the complexity of interacting factors which may impact on fathers' opportunities for and experiences of full-time leave alone. Explicit legal and societal recognition of fathers' paid non-transferable parental leave clearly makes a difference in terms of the normative acceptance and the meaning – more or less “taken for granted” – of fathers' full-time leave, but the impact of this type of provision also interacts with normative, workplace, biographical and family contexts, thereby introducing diversity.

## **14.2 Impact of Parental Leave Alone on Fathers' Lived Experiences**

The social and policy embeddedness of motivations and pathways to leave raises important questions about the intersecting influences which shape and diversify the practices and experiences of fathers on leave. Nevertheless, it is also striking throughout this book that, despite many cross-national and institutional differences, there are also some strong commonalities regarding the consequences of full-time parental leave for fathers. The micro snapshots of experiences within specific employing organizations and family relationships enable us to explore some common trends as well as the specificity of diverse experiences.

A first common trend is related to what fathers “do” while on leave. The rare studies on the practices of fathers using the “daddy months” in the 1990s in Norway and Sweden highlighted a focus on caregiving rather than household tasks, the importance of father-child bonds, a new experience of time (“slower” time, different and also more enjoyable compared to work time), and fathering practices oriented towards more “masculine” care activities such as educating and playing. The experiences reported in this book highlight changes and continuities. Fathers on leave alone continue to report the centrality of caring activities in their interview accounts but also describe intensive hard work and the experience as a fully time-consuming job which requires substantial efforts to reconcile with daily housework and leaves little availability for personal time, leisure or working from home (the fathers who are committed to working from home usually do so at night or when the partner gets home).

This contemporary focus on the intensity of caregiving would appear to be linked to two factors. Fathers who share parental leave today are more likely to take leave to care for a child below age 1, when caring is more demanding. More importantly, most fathers on leave no longer see themselves as “child-minder” parental figures, who are expected to babysit and help out for a few weeks, but rather as fully-fledged carers who carry out all tasks related to organizing and doing hands-on care, who make an effort to build up their own routines and also do other tasks such as clean-

ing, shopping and cooking the family's evening meal. This full assumption of what we might call the stay-at-home "mothering mandate" (Arendell 2000) is associated in fathers' discourses to the context of full-time leave alone and solo caring: in fact, the studies in this book show that fathers differentiate between "paternity leave", taken straight after the birth of the child in order to "help" the mother and "support life", and parental leave allowing for full responsibility in childcare. Those who take part-time leave or 1 day a week off work to care for the child (e.g. see French fathers in this book) do not report experiencing the same kind of impact, implying a shift towards the demands and the mandate of primary caregiving.

A second common trend is related to the many varied consequences of leave. This experience of intensive and involved caregiving is felt to be a positive experience: learning to take responsibility alone; being preoccupied and absorbed with their child; shaping daily life around the child's routines; enjoying increased physical contact with the child; sympathizing with mothers' stress; learning to balance care and housework; experiencing the time as fulfilling, joyful, "a luxury", "an oasis". As such these fathers have taken on *emotional responsibility* as well as direct engagement and accessibility as discussed by Doucet (2016), Chap. 2, in this book. But ambivalence with reports of anxiety, saturation, fatigue and boredom are mixed with these affirming experiences. Such fathers realize that they may not be totally cut out for full-time caregiving and might not like to repeat the experience. Overall, then, these findings are a vivid reminder of the challenges, difficulties and diversity in mothers' experiences of childcare for a new born child at home (Arendell 2000). Moreover, in contrast to fathers in the 1990s, the studies in this book reveal men, albeit not all, who take on household tasks and home planning, in line with the idea that the sharing of leave also implies taking on responsibility for both care and work, on a par with what mothers do when at home.

Some diversity, however, also emerges, under the influence of policy context, conjugal gender roles and father's agency. Some fathers, in particular those who perceive themselves as "helper" rather than "independent" fully-autonomous fathers, still rely on their partner or another person for some of the housework and perceive their task as focused essentially on childminding. Nevertheless, some of these initially "dependent" fathers, moved by a fundamental rupture in gender roles due to full-time solo caring, also experience a break away from this "dependent" profile and report that they have acquired more autonomy and skills. In sum, context, conjugal relations and agency are all important shaping factors of what fathers "do" and experience while taking full-time parental leave.

A third common trend is related to the impact of fathers' full-time parental leave alone on gender equality in families, an issue taken up in all the studies in this book. Rather than clear-cut, linear trends, the contributions in this book stress the exploratory and complex nature of the qualitative findings. This diverse pattern is to be expected given the range of contextual factors and agency as well as the difficulty in disentangling short-term and long-term impacts. Five main conclusions may be highlighted across national contexts. First, fathers' experiences during paternity leave taken with the mother immediately after the birth of the child are consistently reported as different from those of solo caring during full-time parental leave; the

latter is seen to foster more equal parenting, to help fathers and mothers to “trust” each other and understand the situation of the “other gender”, and to partially challenge gendered divisions of housework. Secondly, given that many couples were egalitarian-oriented before sharing parental leave, it is wise to be cautious in attributing equal parenting practices to the impact of father’s use of parental leave. More longitudinal qualitative research is needed following through couples before, during and after leave to complement emergent longitudinal quantitative studies which have been able to control for sample selectivity.

Thirdly, despite this caution, the narratives of the more egalitarian and innovative fathers report some important effects of leave alone, in particular: the possibility of putting to the test the fathers’ capacity to take on and implement the full “parenting” and “housekeeper” mandates; the development of individualized routines and the incorporation, into daily life, of more discussion and negotiation of equal workloads within the couple; the enhanced reflexivity on gender differences which fathers’ solo caring incentivizes. Fourth, the need to identify the effects of leave alone according to the different fathering profiles and the duration and type of leave use. For example, the more traditional “dependent” fathers often report the strengthening of bonds, caring skills and emotional competency, and some may even experience a “fundamental break” with previous gender roles, but their perceptions and practices may remain strongly gender unequal and far from the ideal of a gender neutral model of leave, care and housework. Moreover, the impact on practices in the long term, in spite of the acquisition of skills during solo caring, may be weak (e.g. father who took leave to protect wife’s job, but was relieved to return to the former gendered division of unpaid work).

Lastly, it is therefore difficult to be sure of the long-term effects of these reported changes, as there are many intervening factors, from perceptions to labour market circumstances, which can affect the future division of unpaid work in couples. As we have noted in Chap. 1, recent large-scale longitudinal studies have suggested that solo caring of at least one month’s duration can have lasting effects on fathers’ engagement in child care-care. However, unemployment or sudden increased work demands for one parent may lead some couples to change their equal division of childcare and housework, despite egalitarian preferences. The fact that both members of the couple are capable of assuming these full responsibilities does make for flexibility in the gendered division of labour within households and over the life course, which is likely to include periods of precariousness, unemployment or dependency for all adult individuals. So gender flexibility may be seen as positive from the point of view of gender equality in families but should not lead us to forget a broader structural view. For example, gender rotation in unpaid work may also be seen as an advantage for global labour markets wishing to rely less on gender differences and male breadwinning in order to be able to respond to flexible labour demands.



### 14.3 Final Comments

In summary, the contributions to this book shed light on the pathways and consequences of fathers' use of parental leave alone, both confirming and moving beyond previous findings. In line with other studies, the findings confirm that longstanding well-paid individual entitlements for fathers facilitate, increase and legitimize the uptake of full-time parental leave by fathers. They also confirm the role of other well-known enabling factors. Those connected to workplace factors, such as work sector, managers' attitudes and fathers' occupations, earnings and qualifications, with highly qualified high-earner men able to rely on more resources and leverage to face adverse policy or workplace situations. Those related to gender roles and family context, such as the mother's full-time paid work/career perspectives, shared gender equality values in couples, societal debate on the latter, and family strategies which promote parental care until the child finds a place in early childcare services. More unexpectedly, the exploratory qualitative studies reveal that fathers' experience of barriers or work penalties on return to work emerge in all policy national contexts examined in this book, thereby revealing the slow and uneven nature of change in the direction of societal recognition of gender-neutral leave architecture and practices. Similarly, evidence shows the necessity for new cultural practices to celebrate new forms of father care, particularly in workplaces.

It is in relation to fathers' lived experiences that the exploratory qualitative studies provide innovative findings. The distinctiveness of the lived experience of full-time solo caring, compared to leave taken with the mother immediately after childbirth, is a common trend across all policy contexts. The dimensions of this singularity may be summarized along several main dimensions, when compared to the effects of paternity leave, which have also been shown to promote the practical and emotional involvement of fathers (O'Brien, 2009): sense of and implementation of full responsibility and autonomy; routinisation of father care, based on the building up of own individualized care practices; experience of childcare as intensive hard work, both rewarding and demanding; socialisation to gender equality issues and values, in particular the belief that fathers' can "acquire" the primary caregiving role and combine childcare, housework and home management when on leave.

A further important finding is that lived experiences are diverse and complex, due to variations in policy and leave characteristics, normative and workplace factors, and fathers' and mothers' motivations, subjective perceptions and practices. The comparison across different national contexts illuminates how different policy provisions affect the social meaning of fathers' full-time leave. In the absence of statutory leave policies for fathers, leave can be experienced as a 'gift' from the mother and a normative transgression of maternal primary caregiving; full-time leave comes at a high price, which only a few fathers are willing and able to pay. In contrast, when statutory leave policies for fathers are in existence, leave can be experienced as a 'right', albeit not necessarily as an 'equal' right. Uptake of leave alone is not equally transformative of co-parenting and gender equality for all interviewees, even if its singularity is experienced by all fathers. *Involved fatherhood* and

*gender equalitarianism* may not always be co-terminous. Nevertheless, the contributions to this book suggest that men on leave alone are viewed, in all national contexts, as agents of social change, as men who are contributing to the redefinition of gender cultural models of parenting and family.

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