

## Policy is not enough –

### The influence of the workplace on fathers' use of parental leave in Sweden

Linda Haas & Philip Hwang

#### Abstract

While fathers in Sweden have had the right to paid parental leave since 1974, fathers take only one-fourth of all days of parental leave parents take. There is a strong cultural norm of involved fatherhood, so couples typically want to share leave more evenly than they in fact do. This article explores how the workplace might constrain fathers' use of this policy, a topic that receives much less attention than economic or attitudinal obstacles. Based on interviews with 56 employees in five large private sector companies, we found that fathers' opportunities for parental leave were reported to exist at the margins rather than at the center of their work lives. Workplace culture included deeply held normative expectations that made it difficult for fathers to choose to take leave, while several aspects of workplace structure negatively affected fathers' capabilities of taking leave. Workplace culture and structure seemed to be based on the gendered idea that the ideal worker will prioritize work and has limited caregiving responsibilities, which set meaningful limits to fathers' ability to take even the two months of nontransferable leave granted by legislation. Future research should explore how formidable these obstacles are in a more representative sample of companies.

Contemporary fathers are expected to be more involved in childcare than earlier generations (Coltrane, 2009). The right to government-mandated paid parental leave is a policy that could increase men's involvement in early childcare, without sacrificing their labor market status. Parental leave for fathers is also a policy that can promote gender equality, since fathers who take parental leave are more likely to share childcare with partners after their leaves are over (Arnalds, Eydal & Gislason, 2013; Haas & Hwang, 2008; Nepomnyaschy & Waldfogel, 2007; Tanaka & Waldfogel, 2007). Moreover, fathers' leavetaking may increase the visibility of caregiving at the workplace, undermining the rationale for employment discrimination against women (Brighthouse & Wright, 2008).

Fathers have the right to paid parental leave in 28 countries; however, only 29% of fathers take leave in 17 countries that keep statistics (Koslowski, Blum & Moss, 2016; our calculations). This large gap between policy and practice suggests it is important to examine factors preventing fathers from taking leave. While many levels of social structure can be involved, including partner relationships and individuals' gender attitudes, more attention could be paid to leave implementation at the workplace. Although studies suggest a perceived lack of organizational support negatively impacts men's leavetaking (Hobson & Fahlén, 2009; Murgia & Poggio, 2013), we know little about how lack of support is embedded in the culture and structure of work organizations.

This paper contributes new insights about how work organizations place constraints on fathers' use of parental leave policy, by presenting results of a qualitative study of companies conducted in Sweden, where fathers have had the statutory right to take paid leave since 1974. Interviews with managers and fathers in five large private companies are used to explore these research questions: What normative expectations about fathers' use of parental leave are communicated by the workplace culture and how do these expectations seem to affect fathers' leavetaking? What aspects of work structure are reported as negatively impacting men's capability of taking leave?

### **Theoretical perspective**

To better understand the influence of the workplace on fathers' ability to participate in childcare, scholars suggest it is important to consider the gender subtext of work organizations (Williams, 2010). In particular, the "deep level of shared beliefs and assumptions" in organizational culture helps to perpetuate the "the ideal worker norm" (also called the "male model of work"), where workers are expected to put jobs first and to

have limited caregiving responsibilities (Lewis, 2001). Most workplaces are structured for “ideal workers,” with time expectations and workloads that make leavetaking difficult (Blithe, 2015). The ideal worker norm is difficult to combine with new norms for involved fatherhood, which policies like paid parental leave promote (Connell, 2000; Ranson, 2007). We explore the ideal worker norm’s impact on company culture, company structure and fathers’ leavetaking in the companies we studied.

Power relations are an important characteristic of work organizations as gendered social institutions (Bloksgaard, 2012). Albiston (2015, p. 192) contends employees’ negotiations around workplace rights such as parental leave are “embedded within unequal relations of power that are inherent in the employment relationship and the development of work as an institution.” It is therefore important to study the role that managers – who for the most part are men in large private companies – constrain or facilitate fathers’ leavetaking, through gatekeeping and mentoring (Blithe, 2015). Men managers are less likely than women managers to facilitate employees use of flexible working arrangements (Sweet, Pitt-Catsouphes & James, 2016). They also tend to behave as role models following the ideal worker norm by working long hours and seldom using work-life policies (den Dulk, Peper, Sadar & Lewis, 2011). Our study explores the power that managers may have in men’s decisionmaking concerning parental leave.

Lastly, gender theory conceptualizes masculinity as a social category intersecting with other social categories (Christensen & Jensen, 2014). Our study takes social class into account through contrasting the experiences of white-collar and blue-collar fathers. For white-collar workers, workplace norms often mandate intensive allegiance to work and little time spent on caregiving (Blair-Loy, 2003). Blue-collar fathers may feel less capable of

taking leave because they have less power and greater concerns about job security as well as co-workers who reinforce traditional gender attitudes toward parenting (Plantin, 2007; Williams, Blair-Loy & Berdahl, 2013).

### **Previous research**

The lack of workplace support has been found to reduce men's use of government-provided parental leave in several nations (e.g., Escot, Fernandez-Cornejo, Lafuete & Poza, 2012; Fox, Pascall & Warren, 2009; Ueda & Kichijoji-Kitamachi, 2012). Private companies, which tend to be more male-dominated than public authorities, demonstrate the least support for fathers' leavetaking (Bygren & Duvander, 2006; Geisler & Kreyenfeld, 2011; Lappegård, 2012). While the lack of company support is well known as an obstacle to fathers' leavetaking, relatively little research has examined how support is manifested in the culture and structure of work organizations. Research has focused mainly on the lack of managerial and co-worker support for leavetaking.

Top managers typically do not prioritize work-family integration as a strategic organizational concern or agree to changes in job design and workloads that facilitate employees taking advantage of leave policy, even with a government mandate in place (Bäck-Wiklund & Plantin, 2007). Middle managers often lack training to successfully implement statutory policies (Peper, Dikkers, Dinkenberg & van Engen, 2011) and are concerned that policy use will reduce productivity since they frequently are not given sufficient resources to replace staff on leave (den Dulk et al. 2011). Since middle managers now handle most personnel matters, it is not surprising that when they are less supportive, fathers take less parental leave (Bloksgaard, 2015; McKay & Doucet, 2010). Lack of co-worker support also reduces the amount of parental leave fathers take (Haas, Allard &

Hwang, 2002; McKay & Doucet, 2010) and fathers are less likely to take leave where colleagues have not taken leave before (Bygren & Duvander, 2006; Wissö & Plantin, 2015). Fathers also reduce their leave time or take leave during slower work periods to reduce co-workers' stress (McKay & Doucet, 2010; Tremblay & Genin, 2011).

Our study was developed to explore in more depth how managerial and co-worker support might impact fathers' leavetaking, as well as to discover additional aspects of workplace culture and workplace structure that serve as formidable barriers.

### **The Swedish leave context**

We investigated the organizational context of fathers' experiences with parental leave in Sweden, the first country to offer fathers the right to paid parental leave. At the time of our study, Swedish fathers had the individual non-transferable right to two months of parental leave, compensated at 80% of salary up to a relatively high income ceiling, with the right to share an additional nine months of well-compensated leave with mothers. The individual right to leave provides fathers with strong institutional backing for their leave requests.

Government campaigns have urged men to take parental leave and overtime fathers' leave use has slowly increased. By 2015, 88 percent took parental leave, for an average of 91 days. Nevertheless, fathers take only 25% of all days taken by parents and only 13% of couples share leave equally (40-60% each) (Haas, Duvander & Hwang, 2016). One reason might be that Swedish workplaces remain dominated by the ideal worker norm, where employees are expected to keep child care from infringing too much upon their devotion to paid work (Votinus 2008). The lack of workplace support reduces the amount of parental leave Swedish fathers take, especially in the private sector where the majority work (Haas,

et al. 2002; Hobson, Fahlén & Takacs, 2014). Our study offers more detailed insight into how the workplace impacts Swedish fathers' leavetaking than any previous study has done.

## **Methods**

We chose a qualitative research approach because little is known about the dynamics of company support for fathers' use of state leave policies and because qualitative methods are often used in organizational research when studying policy implementation (Lee, 1999). We employed an organizational case study method, which investigates an organization in-depth, relying upon several members (Yin, 2009). We studied multiple cases (five private companies), to avoid focusing on one unusual case.

The five companies were recruited from an earlier survey of 244 large private companies (Haas & Hwang, 2016). We chose large companies hiring over 300 workers, were predominantly male (60%+), employed both blue-collar and white-collar workers and were Swedish-owned and headquartered. These strict limits resulted in a small recruitment pool (N=13); of this group five companies completed all study phases.

The mean number of employees in the five companies was 1,658 (R: 320-2600); they were on average 72% male (R: 60-83%) and top management was 87% male (R: 66-100%). This sample included three manufacturing companies that produced wood pulp (hereafter referred to as WP), wood flooring (FC) and industrial machinery (IM). Also included were a retail company selling paper products (PS) and a service company providing recycling (RS).

There was variation in support for fathers' leavetaking. In the survey, RS (the service company) reported the most support, with 40-61% of fathers taking the quota, top management strongly urging supervisors to support men's responsibility for children and

middle managers being somewhat positive toward fathers' leavetaking. WP (the pulp manufacturer) also reported 40-61% of fathers took their quota, but top management did not strongly urge supervisors to support men's responsibility for children and middle managers were neutral toward fathers' leavetaking. In the remaining companies, less than 21% of fathers had taken the f quota, top management did not urge supervisors to support men's childrearing responsibility; mid-level managers were neutral to negative.

We conducted interviews (in Swedish) at the workplace during work hours. At each company, we individually interviewed a top manager, the senior HR director, a middle manager over blue-collar workers and a middle manager over white-collar workers. We then conducted focus group interviews, one with 3-5 blue-collar fathers and the other with 3-5 white-collar fathers, all with young children, each in the same work group. Fathers were recruited to participate by their middle managers, who we interviewed.

Interviewing at different levels offered insights into company culture and work structure, from people linked together in the organizational structure, at different levels of power. Altogether we interviewed 56: 20 managers (14 fathers, five women) and 36 fathers of young children in non-managerial positions. Half of managers who were fathers had taken the father's quota (perhaps picked by HR to impress us), but less than one-fourth of the non-managerial fathers had, with no difference by job type. These percentages are much lower than for Sweden, suggesting these companies were good sites to explore obstacles to fathers' leavetaking.

Interviews began by having informants respond to vignettes about hypothetical situations. A vignette is a short description of a particular circumstance that serves as a basis for discussion (Finch, 1987). This is a less threatening way of approaching sensitive

topics (e.g., gap between fathers' leave use and cultural support for fatherhood). It was successful in establishing rapport between interviewer and informants. Vignettes can also help uncover cultural norms, which become evident in the way informants respond to hypothetical situations by stating their attitudes and beliefs. An example of a vignette is the following: "At a coffee break, one of the middle-level managers mentions he would like to take parental leave for some months. He is however worried that it would perhaps negatively affect his career opportunities. What would you tell him? What do you think that top management as well as co-workers and subordinates would say? Has anything like this happened in your company?"

Vignettes were followed by direct questions concerning how parental leave was dealt with in their section of the company. Questions included: "How would you describe the culture when it concerns parental leave for fathers?" "What problems come up when a man wants to take parental leave?" "What kinds of things facilitate men taking parental leave?" "What does the company have to win and to lose from encouraging fathers to take leave?" (Interview protocol is available from the authors.) While we did not directly ask about fathers' experiences with parental leave, these came up in discussion.

Interviews provided insights into fathers' interpretations of the climate for fathers' leavetaking as well as fathers' leave decisionmaking. Conversations within focus groups were enlightening in understanding how fatherhood is talked about and constructed in a particular organizational context. We kept in mind that informants' responses represented their interpretations, not something factual. We do not generalize results to the five companies or Swedish companies in general.



All interviews were recorded and transcribed. We analyzed transcripts using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), a technique for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns within interview data. Since our research questions were theoretically driven, ours was mainly a deductive approach; we were also open to discovering unanticipated patterns.

We read transcripts twice, establishing a tentative list of first-order categories that represented something important about the data in relation to our research questions about workplace culture and structure. Transcripts were then read twice more to ensure sufficient evidence for each category (e.g., mentioned by informants in most companies) and if additional categories could be added or existing categories divided. Our goal was to develop categories that resulted from a process that was thorough, based on continual reflection about all the data and not merely on a few good examples. This process led to 26 first-order categories that constituted specific cultural and structural obstacles to fathers' leavetaking (see Table 1 for the data structure).

In the next step, we organized these 26 categories into seven broader level patterns or themes. Four of these themes related to workplace culture, while three related to workplace structure. We identified representative quotes for these themes. We assigned pseudonyms to the fathers in the focus groups so that we could make sure that we represented as many voices as possible.

## **Results**

Interviews suggested how various aspects of workplace culture and work structure could constrain fathers' leavetaking in these five Swedish private companies.

### ***Workplace culture as a barrier***

The lack of a workplace culture supporting fathers' leavetaking was readily apparent. IM's blue-collar manager (two months<sup>1</sup>) told us, "The culture concerning fathers' parental leave? We don't have one (laughs)." The fathers who worked under him, interviewed separately, agreed. Anders (no leave) said: "There perhaps is no culture around this....is there a culture here?" His colleague Caleb (two weeks) replied: "Yes [laughs], a culture which puts the lid on it or which is not so engaged in the issue perhaps?"

Table 1 displays four themes about cultural barriers at the workplace that emerged from analyzing the interviews, along with the specific categories that fitted each theme. These themes, presented below, conform to workplace norms likely to discourage men's leavetaking.

*Workplace norm: men's leavetaking was not a strategic concern for the company*

Fathers reported men's leavetaking was not a strategic company concern. Andreas, a FC white-collar father (few days) summarized several aspects of this (discussed further below): "Men today want to be at home with their children...[but]...it is not in the company's strategic plan and no specific measures have been carried out making it possible for everyone to take leave....they just go along with the laws which exist." Below we discuss specific ways this norm was manifest in the company.

*Companies lacked formal policy and strategic planning in regard to fathers' leavetaking.*

The IM top manager (no leave) said: "Nothing in the strategic plan is about parental leave and I cannot say that we have introduced any special measures....we try to solve it so far as it goes, but as I said earlier it doesn't work for everyone." WP's HR director (few weeks)

---

<sup>1</sup> Average amount of leave taken per child

reported: "Before this interview I thought about whether I have placed parental leave high on the agenda.... it is absolutely not on the agenda today."

The consequences of a lack of formal policy were articulated by FC's white-collar manager (one month): "...if there was an expressed policy ... it would be much easier for me to say, 'I will be home for two months,' and then I know that there is something that backs that up. " Blue-collar fathers, like Claes at PS (two months), also complained that fathers' leave was not a company priority: "It would of course be cool if they [top management] went out and said that they support us, that they will try to make things easier, I think that most people would think it is good if one knows that they have your back. But they have not done that..."

*Managers assumed no encouragement was needed, law was sufficient.* WP's HR director (a woman) indicated her company did not need to pressure fathers: "In Sweden everyone is very conscious of how [leave] functions and what rights people have, and we follow of course the laws that exist.... They know of course they have the right to and can be on leave."

*Champions of fathers' leavetaking were absent.* The RS manager of white-collar workers (no children) told us, "there is no one who is a strong advocate for this." IM's HR director (a woman) revealed, "We don't have anyone who is a driving force who I know who is passionate about these questions."

*There was no discussion about fathers' leavetaking.* The FC top manager (one month) said: "I don't think that there is anyone who talks about this at the company, that raises this as a useful experience." WP's blue-collar manager (two months) said, "There is no one who

thinks that 'guys should work, gals should be at home at the stove.' But we don't talk about it [parental leave] and I don't know why, we haven't gotten there yet."

*There was a limited understanding of what companies might have to gain by promoting fathers' leavetaking.* In response to a direct question about what the company had to win or lose by encouraging fathers' leavetaking, most interviewees such as the FC HR director (a woman) were aware that not supporting fathers' leavetaking could hurt recruitment and retention: "The win is that if we allow pappas to be on parental leave we could attract pappas or soon-to-be pappas to work with us because they know that they can be on parental leave with us.... It is an important target group that we want to have...."

Perceived economic benefits of fathers' leavetaking, however, do not challenge the ideal worker norm. There were two types of benefits mentioned by a few that did challenge the ideal worker norm. First, fathers' leavetaking could force companies to become more flexible. WP's blue-collar manager (two months) suggested:

We ... learn to be more flexible and understand that work can't rise or fall with a certain individual.... employees learn more and become more...versatile. That is what characterizes a modern organization, this flexibility...people must be able to be away and then come back, without it causing a mass of problems.

The second economic benefit involved "new powers" that fathers could gain from leave which were useful qualities at the workplace. WP's HR director (two months) suggested:

Increasingly, we think that a person g a number of useful experiences by being home with children – you must be able to do several things simultaneously, you are steadily in situations where you need to make decisions, to adjust to get it to go together, it's a stressful situation, and one becomes more sensitive to what others think.

*Workplace norm: men taking leave was not normative*

People often indicated that men taking leave was no longer something “strange.” For example, IM’s top manager (no leave) said, “it is nothing strange today that guys are on leave, it is difficult to answer when the change happened, it was of course not so from the beginning....I was of course never at home and there was no talk about that then.”

While leave was no longer strange, it was also not yet normative, evident in several ways.

*Not all fathers could take leave.* Eight of the 50 fathers had not taken any leave and several references were made to the fact that it was not possible for all fathers to take leave.

*Leaves were short.* Only 13 of the 42 leavetakers reported taking the father’s quota of two months. WP’s white collar manager (some days) expressed regret: “I have been at home one day a week.... I want to be home more of course, the time goes by so fast and one misses so much, they grow up so fast.”

*Leaves were seen as a choice.* Managers did not report leave as an expectation. The WP white-collar manager (few days) said: “obviously guys should be at home with children if they want to.” The IM blue-collar manager (two months) said, “This with laws....shouldn’t a person be able to decide it himself?”

*Group norms discouraged fathers’ leavetaking.* White-collar worker Calle at WP (few days) said: “A person wants to belong and be liked, you do what everyone else does, check out the situation. If no one goes home on a longer leave, then I don’t either.” His co-worker, Anton (few days) agreed: “It’s not spoken outloud, it is a little under the surface, but a

person notices what others do and follows that.” Blue-collar workers also reported group norms made leave difficult. Bo at RS (few days) stated: “If no one is at home then that is contagious, who wants to stick out like that?” Anders, at IM (few days): “I work with a team, the older generation who hasn’t been at home so much with their children, then a person probably gets criticism...so I hesitate.”

*Managers’ not taking leave sent negative messages about fathers’ leavetaking.* RS white-collar fathers discussed this:

Adam (one month): it would be good if we saw more managers who were at home with children, then we would know that longer parental leaves are okay...The culture begins with them,...I believe more guys would pursue it.

Bertil (two months): This is an important group....if they go out and show visibly what values the company stands for and ... show how it works in practice also, they establish foundational values for the whole organization.

*Workplace norm: leavetaking should minimally disrupt work practices*

The third norm apparent in interviews was a strong expectation in workplace culture that if fathers took leave, they should do so in ways less disruptive to traditional work practices.

*Leaves were best taken during quiet periods.* Fathers in Sweden are criticized for taking parental leave around Christmas or in summer. Interviews suggested however they took leave then because that was most convenient for companies. Adam, a white-collar RS father (one month) explained: “As it is now there are no managers who indicate that they think this is an important issue. That’s what leads us to settle for leave in the summer and at Christmas....We believe that it is only okay then.” PS white-collar manager (woman, one

year) indicated: A person doesn't stay home during the most intensive periods.... I would become disappointed in such a colleague."

*Fathers' were expected to take leave part-time.* The IM HR director said: "I believe that a person would rather work part-time during his leave in order to take care of the worst so that it doesn't become total chaos when he returns." Part-time leave was also less visible, as mentioned by Bron, a FC blue-collar fathers (3.5 months): "I don't feel that I adjust my leave to the job, the family is the most important for me. But...there is not so much to do in this department on Fridays and then it suits me to be at home those days ...It is not noticed that I am gone."

*Leavetakers were expected to tell managers how to get their jobs done while they were gone.* The IM HR director reported:

Before a person goes to the manager and says that he will be on parental leave he has solved a lot of things before...who can do what and then he gives those as suggestions to the manager. Because a person knows that they are creating a problem for themselves, the manager and their colleagues.

*Co-workers were expected to pick up extra work.* Only a few interviewees reported that leavetakers were replaced by substitutes. Co-worker delegation meant less work for managers. The WP top manager explained: "We can of course solve it by the employee delegating a little as he wants...and then we don't have to get involved exactly in how it works out." He admitted: "In the long run it is not sustainable that others take such a big part of your job, that doesn't work."

Relying upon co-workers to pick up the extra work took advantage of the fact that co-workers were loyal to each other. Damon, a blue-collar father at PS described this:

There is an atmosphere here with us... one helps out ...when someone becomes a parent...they are of course what is most important in our lives, children, of course you want to help out with that.....it is deeply rooted in the company, it is a little unwritten, that one steps up for each other.

A comment by the WP top manager (three months) suggested promoting co-worker loyalty could be a managerial strategy to solve leave without any company change: “...we try to spread the spirit that people should help out. You know, next time it can be your turn.”

*Managerial fathers were expected to keep contact with work while on leave.* FCs' blue-collar manager (few days) said, “If I am on parental leave a day I must work at home that day. I do payroll and other things ... I am of course on line at home when I am needed.”

WP's HR director (unknown amount) said, “...A person can be on line and take a meeting by telephone.... it doesn't work to be gone long periods, one must keep up with what happens in the company.”

*Workplace norm: the job was expected to be a priority over leavetaking*

Men in these companies were expected to prioritize their jobs over caregiving, taking less parental leave. This was manifested in several ways.

*The job was expected to take priority over family.* Balder, a blue-collar father (few weeks) at IM, admitted: “About the choices I have made as a pappa, a person thinks of course that ‘I decide for myself,’ but probably I have completely thought about the job.”

Alfons, a blue-collar father at WP (few days) said: “This conversation has made me think... why am I not at home?... dear God! Yes, I thought that my job has been so important... but I still think that...” This view was reinforced by managers, e.g., PS's HR director (a woman)



said: “It is positive of course to have engaged personnel.... they don’t just go home and let everything be.”

*Concern for co-workers lessened leave length or affected leave timing.* Axel, a white collar father at PS (two weeks) said: “When people have worked awhile together ... the workgroup means a lot....I will hesitate taking as long a leave as my wife has done because I don’t want to cause problems here...a person is a little loyal toward those he works with.” Blue-collar father Christoffer at RS (two weeks) said “....you hesitate if there is a lot to do on the job and if your co-workers are affected a lot by your leave.”

*Managerial fathers anticipated negative career consequences,* a sign companies prioritized work over caregiving. The PS blue-collar manager (two months) explained: “There are fast changes today and a person feels maybe that when you go [on leave]...you miss out on too much if you are home too long.... A person doesn’t want to be at home and see that someone else gets my chances.”

*Blue-collar fathers thought leavetaking jeopardized job security.* Claus at WP (few weeks) said: “I thought that perhaps it would be a good time for me to be at home with our youngest, but then it was a little turbulent and one didn’t know if they needed to let more people go, I waited to see then.” Balder at IM (few weeks) said: “I absolutely didn’t want to be on leave when they were laying people off, it was so insecure, it is still to some extent.”

### ***Work structure as a barrier***

Work structure appeared to be a formidable barrier to fathers’ leavetaking. The white-collar manager at RS (no leave) argued: [Support for fathers’ leave] “must be incorporated into the daily work and it must be incorporated into the daily operations, not just be empty

words.” Three themes about workplace structure emerged, along with specific categories that fitted each theme (Table 1).

*Work practices promote worker indispensability*

Worker indispensability was often discussed as a reason why fathers’ leave was restricted. The top manager at PS (two months) described this problem:

It will become more common that everyone is at home for longer periods even pappas.... That I believe is the biggest challenge...that business doesn’t depend on certain people being here...we must become more flexible as an organisation, and we aren’t there yet.

Two important aspects of existing work practices contributed to worker indispensability.

*Specialization hindered leave.* This was a problem mentioned for almost all workers. WP’s HR director (unknown) said: “The problem is in production, people there are not replaceable as perhaps was once true in the past, but today each person ....is unique and has their competence, they don’t just push buttons, you understand... it takes years to learn some of those jobs!” Björn, a white collar father at IM (two months) indicated: “That is a weakness, that we have no one who is a reflection of ourselves, there is no one who has exactly your experience and your qualifications, you are unique ....if a person wants to be away during a longer time then there becomes a big hole to fill.” Managers were seen as especially indispensable. Kahrs’ blue-collar manager (few leave days) said: “For us, it’s because there is such a long training time and we have responsibility for such big group .... There is of course no one who can take my job.”

*Work intensification discouraged white-collar and managerial fathers from taking leave.*

Anton, a white-collar worker at WP (few days) said: “what makes it difficult [to take leave]

is that ....it is so intensive...we work hard the whole time....It wasn't that way before...I believe then a person got some quieter periods, but now it is 120 kilometers an hour the whole time." FCs' white-collar manager (two weeks) said: "We must work more than what otherwise goes with the job... I have a daughter, she will soon be three years old... I would have chosen to be at home more, but there is a lot [of work] the whole time."

*Insufficient personnel resources prevent leavetaking*

The second aspect of work structured that hindered leavetaking was insufficient personnel resources. This manifested itself in three ways.

*There were no resources for hiring and training of replacements*, which discouraged fathers' leavetaking. Caleb, a blue-collar father at IM (some weeks) said, in reaction to why he and other fathers do not take more leave: "it is an organizational problem...a person must have more backup." Bo, a white-collar father at FC (two weeks) said: "I feel it would be extremely difficult for me to be away from the job a half year because there is no one who can replace me. It is discouraging if there aren't replacements, they must work at getting personnel."

*Company dependence on a smaller workforce* was a second aspect of personnel resources that appeared to discourage fathers from taking leave. This can be a strategic choice by management to reduce operating costs. Balder, a blue-collar worker at IM (few weeks) stated: "if more fathers want to be on leave, then we must have a bigger resource pool to take from and there isn't one just now. I believe that it will take many years for this to happen, so it takes many years before guys and gals come to equally share parental leave.' The white-collar manager at FC (one month) admitted: "in recent years, our organization has been very slim ... and one does not have backup for each other like before

– every person is needed and there is no one directly who can do your job when you are away.”

*There was infrequent use of innovative working practices to provide replacements.* The FC HR director (woman) pointed out that forward thinking was needed: “if we employ guys in the 25-year old range... we must be prepared that they will be on pappu leave later when they are 32, ....We must think in advance, how can we replace personnel?”

Some suggested cross-training would facilitate fathers’ leave. However, such training was uncommon or poorly organized. Carl, a blue-collar worker at FC (two weeks) said “They have said that they will teach people on all machines, but that ... hasn’t happened.” Bo, a white-collar worker at the same company (no leave) suggested: “Training has been unbelievably difficult the latest years....There is no system support.... It has been under discussion many times to find a solution for this, but it hasn’t happened yet.” WP’s top manager (three months) offered a positive example of cross-training:

I found a person who wanted to try out a new level when his boss was on pappu leave, and it is ... an opportunity to test abilities and they want to develop themselves.... he got ... another management job later ... We have...personnel who have worked here so long and there seldom becomes any open positions, so I try to turn this [replacing someone on leave] into something that is also good for the workplace.

The PSblue-collar manager (two months) also saw the value of cross-training: “If some one goes home then another can try out the position. There becomes more rotation...I would like to see that. My guys could take an office job, without such fixed boundaries...that is what I would like to see.”

*Company lacks systematic procedures for facilitating leavetaking for all fathers*

The lack of a strategic plan for leavetaking meant there were also no systematic procedures in place for leave facilitation. Bertil, a white-collar father at RS (two months) contrasted his company with his wife's: "There are companies where....people talk about substitutes and how they shall replace people. But here a few emergency solutions are put in place when someone wants to be at home." His manager (no children) agreed:

We have not been accustomed to so many fathers being at home a long time and then we haven't of course needed to come up with such big solutions..., a guy here and there...it is hardly noticed....If you then want more guys to be at home with their children...I don't know how to get that to work?"

The lack of a systematic approach to accommodating all fathers' leavetaking was manifest in two ways.

*Solutions were developed on a case-by-case basis.* Andreas, a white-collar father at FC (few days), "No specific measures have been carried out that would make it possible for everyone to take leave, it must be solved individually." Managers were also matter-of-fact about this. The blue-collar manager at PS (two months) stated: "We solve it as it comes up." It seemed likely that leave was made possible for favored employees. The PS HR director (woman) said: "if I have a good relationship with someone and I notice that there is a desire and a drive for the job, then I help that person, it spurs me of course to come up with solutions."

*Managers lacked training and support in how to handle fathers' leavetaking.* No training or support was provided on this subject for managers. RS's white-collar manager (no children) said, "I don't get much help, so it [fathers taking leave] can be negative." The IM blue-collar manager (two months) said, "top management could come up with examples of

solutions, we know of course that people should be able to be at home with children today, but I think that there isn't always a foundation in practice for how we fill the gap when someone is away."

## **Discussion**

While Swedish policy obligates employers to allow fathers to take parental leave, our study suggests that policy does not necessarily change company expectations for working fathers nor encourage flexible work practices that would make leavetaking more feasible. For men working in the five private sector companies in our study, opportunities for parental leave were reported to exist at the margins rather than at the center of their work lives. Several important aspects of workplace culture and work structure were reported to set meaningful limits to fathers' ability to take the two months of nontransferable leave granted them by legislation.

Workplace cultures had established norms that made men's leavetaking seem inappropriate. Fathers' leavetaking was not a strategic issue for the company, leavetaking was not the norm and managers expected fathers to arrange leaves in ways that minimally disrupted work. Because management did not take for granted that fathers would take leave, work remained structured in ways that made it impractical for men to take time off – work practices promoted worker indispensability, insufficient resources prevented replacements and systematic procedures for facilitating leaves for all fathers were missing. Under these circumstances, fathers as loyal employees, concerned about burdening co-workers, felt it was too difficult to take time off.

The influence of the gendered subtext on fathers' leavetaking was evident. Fathers were expected to live up to the traditional standards of the ideal worker, with heavy work

responsibilities and little expectation of caregiving responsibility and most fathers did not question these expectations. Managers played an important role in perpetuating the status quo, making it hard for fathers to take leave because it made their own jobs and meeting productivity goals easier. They also were poor role models of leavetaking, sending a message that it was not appropriate. Unexpectedly, women managers seemed as likely as men managers to uphold the ideal worker norm, perhaps because they were a minority in all companies studied.

As expected, we found social class made some difference in fathers' leave experiences. Some white-collar fathers were concerned about losing career opportunities if they took leave while some blue-collar fathers were worried about job security. Work intensification negatively impacted white-collar and managerial fathers. However, both blue-collar and white-collar fathers reported that job devotion and specialization made it difficult for them to take leave.

While fathers easily discussed constraints that work culture and work structure created for men's leavetaking in their companies, most were surprisingly not upset about these constraints, given the strong cultural climate for active fatherhood in Sweden. They took the situation for granted and did not seem likely to push for company change. While some managers mentioned that complies could be under pressure from a new generation of fathers who would expect to take leave, this "new generation" has actually been employed for some time, since fathers' first gained nontransferable rights to parental leave over 20 years ago (in 1995), without much change in company culture or structure. Our findings suggest that much more research attention needs to be paid to obstacles to fathers' participation in caregiving at the work organization level, as well as what will combat those

obstacles, if we are to understand how social policy can be effective in promoting gender equality.



**Table 1.**  
**Data Structure - Work Culture and Work Structure Obstacles to Fathers' Leavetaking**

<i>Research questions</i>	<i>Themes</i>	<i>Specific categories</i>
What normative expectations about fathers' use of parental leave are communicated by the workplace culture and how do these expectations seem to affect fathers' leavetaking?	Men's leavetaking is not a strategic issue for the company	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•No formal policy or strategic planning</li> <li>•No company encouragement was seen as needed, law sufficient</li> <li>•No champions</li> <li>• No discussion</li> <li>• Limited understanding of what companies might gain from fathers' leavetaking</li> </ul>
	Men taking leave is not normative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Not all fathers could take leave</li> <li>•Leaves were short</li> <li>•Leaves were seen as a choice</li> <li>•Group norms discouraged leavetaking.</li> <li>•Managers not taking leave sent negative message</li> </ul>
	Leavetaking should minimally disrupt work practices.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Leaves taken during quiet periods</li> <li>•Leaves should be part-time</li> <li>•Leavetakers should tell managers how to get their jobs done</li> <li>•Co-workers should pick up extra work</li> <li>•Managerial leavetakers should keep contact with work</li> </ul>
	The job was expected to be a priority over leavetaking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Job prioritized over family</li> <li>•Concern for co-workers lessened leave or affected timing</li> <li>• Managerial fathers anticipated negative career consequences</li> <li>• Blue-collar fathers thought leavetaking jeopardized job security</li> </ul>
What aspects of work structure are reported as negatively impacting men's capability of taking leave?	Work practices promoted worker indispensability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Specialization hindered leave</li> <li>•Work intensification discouraged leave</li> </ul>
	Insufficient personnel resources prevented leavetaking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•No hiring and training of replacements</li> <li>•Dependence on a smaller workforce</li> <li>•Infrequent use of innovative working practices to provide replacements</li> </ul>
	Company lacked systematic procedures for facilitating leaves for all fathers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Solutions on a case-by-case basis</li> <li>•Managers lack training and support</li> </ul>

## References

- Albiston, C. & Leachman, G. (2015). Law as an instrument of social change. In J. Wright (Ed.), *International encyclopedia of the social & behavioral sciences, volume 13, 2nd edition*, (pp. 542-549). Oxford: Elsevier.
- Arnalds, A., Eydal, G. & Gislason, I. (2013). Equal rights to paid parental leave and caring fathers. *Icelandic Review of Politics & Administration*, 9, 323-344. DOI: 10.13177/irpa.a.2013.9.2.4
- Bailyn, L. & Fletcher, J. (2003). The equity imperative. Center for Gender in Organizations. Boston: Simmons School of Management.
- Blair-Loy, M. (2003). *Competing devotions*. Cambridge: Harvard.
- Blithe, S. (2015). *Gender equality and work-life balance*. New York: Routledge
- Bloksgaard, L. (2012). 'No, gender doesn't make a difference...?' *Qualitative Studies*, 3, 163-180. Available at: <http://ojs.statsbiblioteket.dk/index.php/qual/article/view/7308>
- Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Resesarch in Psychology*, 3, 77-101.
- Brighouse, H. and Wright, E. (2008). Strong gender egalitarianism. *Politics & Society*, 36, 360-372. DOI: 10.1177/0032329208320566
- Bygren, M., & Duvander, A-Z. (2006). Parents' workplace situation and fathers' parental leave use. *Journal of Marriage & Family*, 68, 363-372. DOI: 10.1111/j.1741-3737.2006.00258.x

Bäck-Wiklund, M. & Plantin, L. (2007). The workplace as an arena for negotiating the work-family boundation. In R. Crompton, S. Lewis & C. Lyonette (Eds.), *Women, men, work and family in Europe* (pp. 171-189). New York: Palgrave.

Christensen, A. & Jensen, S. (2014). Combining hegemonic masculinity and intersectionality. *Nordic Journal of Masculinities*, 9, 60-75.

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/18902138.2014.892289>.

Coltrane, S. (2009). Fatherhood, gender and work-family policies. In J. Gornick and M Meyers (Eds.), *Gender equality* (pp. 385-408). New York: Verso.

Connell, R. (2000). *The men and the boys*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

den Dulk, L., Peper, B., Sadar, N., & Lewis, S. (2011). Work, family, and managerial attitudes and practices in the European workplace. *Social Politics*, 18, 300-329.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxr009>

Escot, L., Fernandex-Cornejo, J., Lafuete, C., & Poza, C. (2012). Willingness of Spanish men to take maternity leave. *Sex Roles*, 67, 29-42. DOI 10.1007/s11199-012-0142-6

Finch, J. (1987). The vignette technique in survey research. *Sociology*, 21, 105-114.

DOI: 10.1177/0038038587021001008

Fox, E., Pascall, G. & Warren, T. (2009). Work-family policies, participation and practices. *Community, Work & Family*, 12, 313-326. DOI: 10.1080/13668800902966323

Geisler, E. & Kreyenfeld, M. (2011). Against all odds: Fathers' use of parental leave in Germany. *Journal of European Social Policy*, 21, 88-99. DOI:10.1177/0958928710385732

Haas, L., Allard, K., & Hwang, C.-P. (2002). The impact of organizational culture on men's use of parental leave in Sweden. *Community, Work, and Family*, 5, 319-342.

DOI: 1080/1366880022000041801

Haas, L., Duvander, A.-Z. & Hwang, C.-P. (2016). Sweden country note. In A. Koslowski, S. Blum & P. Moss (Eds.) *International review of leave policies and research 2016*.

Available at: <http://www.leavenetwork.org>

Haas, L. & Hwang, C.-P. (2008). The impact of taking parental leave on fathers' participation in childcare and relationships with children: Lessons from Sweden.

*Community, Work & Family*, 11, 85-104. DOI: 10.1080/13668800701785346

Haas, L. & Hwang, C.-P. (2016). It's about time! Company support for fathers' entitlement to reduced work hours in Sweden. *Community, Work & Family*, 23, 142-167. DOI:

10.1093/sp/jxv033

Harrington, B. & Ladge, J. (2009). Work-life integration. *Organizational Dynamics*, 38, 148-157. DOI: 10.1016/j.orgdyn.2009.02.003.

Hobson, B. & Fahlén, S. (2009). Competing scenarios for European fathers. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 624, 214-233.

DOI: 0.1177/0002716209334435

Hobson, B., Fahlén, S. & Takacs, J. (2014). A sense of entitlement. In B. Hobson (Ed.), *Work-life balance* (pp. 57-91). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Koslowski, A., Blum, S. & Moss, P. (2016). *12<sup>th</sup> international review of leave policies and related research*. Available at: <http://www.leavenetwork.org>.

Lappegård, T. (2012). Couples' parental leave practices. *Journal of Family & Economic Issues*, 33, 298-305. DOI 10.1007/s10834-012-9291-6

Lee, T. (1999). *Using qualitative methods in organizational research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Lewis, S. (2001). Restructuring workplace cultures. *Women in Management Review*, 16, 21-

9. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/09649420110380256>

McCarthy, A., Cleveland, J., Hunter, S., Darcy, C. & Grady G. (2012). Employee work-life outcomes in Ireland. *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 24, 1257-1276.

DOI: 10.1080/09585192.2012.709189

McKay, L. & Doucet, A. (2010). 'Without taking away her leave.' *Fathering*, 8, 300-320.

Murgia, A. & Poggia, B. (2013). Fathers' stories of hegemony and resistance in organizational cultures. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 20, 413-420.

DOI:10.1111/j.1468-0432.2012.00592.x

Nepomnyaschy, L. & Waldfogel, J. (2007). Paternity leave and fathers' involvement with their young children. *Community, Work & Family*, 10, 427-453.

DOI: 10.1080/13668800701575077

Ollier-Malaterre, A. (2009). Organizational work-life initiatives. *Community, Work & Family*, 12, 159-178. DOI: 10.1080/13668800902778942

Peper, B., Dikkers, J., Dinkenberg, C. & van Engen, M. (2011). Causes and consequences of the use of work-life policies by professionals. In S. Kaiser (Ed.), *Creating balance?* (pp. 225-250). Berlin: Springer Verlag.

Plantin, L. (2007). Different classes, different fathers? *Community, Work & Family*, 10, 93-110. DOI: 10.1080/13668800601110835

Ranson, G. (2007). Fatherhood and work. In M. Flood, J. Gardiner, B. Pease & K. Pringle (Eds.), *The international encyclopedia of men and masculinities* (pp. 198-200). London: Routledge.

Sweet, S., Pitt-Catsouphes, M., & James, J. (2016). Successes in changing flexible work arrangement use. *Work & Occupations*, 43, 75-109. DOI: 10.1177/0730888415595094

Tanaka, S. & Waldfogel, J. (2007). Effects of parental leave and work hours on fathers' involvement with babies. *Community, Work & Family*, 10, 409-426.

DOI: 10.1080/13668800701575069

Tremblay, D. & Genin, E. (2011). Parental leave. *Employee Responsibilities and Rights Journal*, 23, 249-268. DOI: 10.1007/s10672-011-9176-0

Ueda, Y. & Kichijoji-Kitamachi, M. (2012). The effect of task, organizational, and family factors on taking parental leave. *Business and Management Research*, 1, 113-119.

DOI:10.5430/bmr.v1n2p113

Williams, J. (2010). *Reshaping the work-family debate*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Williams, J., Blair-Loy, M. & Berdahl, J. (2013). Cultural schema, social class and the flexibility stigma. *Journal of Social Issues*, 69, 209-239. DOI: 10.1111/josi.12012

Wissö, T. & Plantin, L. (2015). Fathers and parental support in everyday life. *Families, Relationships & Societies*, 4, 267-280. DOI: 10.1332/204674315X14327182532695

Votinus, J. (2008). "Normkonflikter i regleringen om arbetstagares föräldraskap [Norm conflicts in the regulation of workers' parenthood]. *Retfærd- Nordic Journal of Law & Justice*, 31, 102-30.

Yin, R. (2009). *Case study research, 4<sup>th</sup> edition*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.