NEGOTIATING PARENTAL LEAVE

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Men are facing a challenge to share more than before the responsibilities of family life, child care and housework. This is because women who have traditionally taken care of most of the unpaid carework have become an important part of the labour market. In the Nordic countries, possibilities for men as well as for women to combine paid work and unpaid care work have been guaranteed by the welfare state. For mothers and fathers of young children, the most important support by the state for the reconciliation of work and family are the various forms of economically compensated parental leave. Establishing the present parental leave system where also fathers are recognised as parents has been part of the equality struggle since the 1960’s (Husu et al. 1995; Olsen 2000; Plantin 2001).

In the beginning of 2003, a new parental leave scheme was introduced in Finland. Following the example of other Nordic countries, fathers in Finland now have a possibility for a "daddy quota", a non-transferrable parental leave period to be taken by the father. As parental leave has this far been taken mostly by mothers, the new quota is meant to persuade more fathers to take parental leave. The Finnish system is different from the Swedish, Norwegian and Icelandic ones in that the father's quota is conditional. According to the new scheme, if the father takes at least two weeks of parental leave (that can be shared by the parents as they wish), he gets two extra weeks of paternity leave as a bonus.

Another new leave possibility that aims to encourage the sharing of parental leave between mothers and fathers is the part-time parental leave. Parents of young children can now share parental leave by each reducing their working hours and taking turns in caring for the child. Part-time leave can not be taken by one parent only, but both at the same time. Thus part-time arrangement need to be negotiated with the employers of both parents.

It is too early to evaluate the outcome of these new possibilities on the basis of take-up statistics. The annual statistics of National Insurance Institute (NII) give figures of the receivers, days and euros related to the parental insurance. According to the NII, about 180 fathers had taken the "daddy quota" during the first three months (there were about 14 000 children born during those months). In 2001, paternity benefit was paid to appr. 43 000 men and parental benefit to appr. 1500 men. The average length of paternity leave was 13 days (12 days=two weeks) and the average length of the father's parental leave 65 days (66 days=11 weeks). The average amount of the income-related parental benefit paid to fathers was 52 €/day. (Kelan tilastollinen vuosikirja 2001.)
Knowledge on the take-up and experiences of parental leave by men before the new scheme can help us to evaluate how the new possibilities might be met by parents and their social network, especially by their employers and colleagues at the workplace. There has, however, not been more detailed information available about the take-up of parental leave since the end of 1980's.

To provide such information as well as to learn about the relation of take-up to the position of men and women in the labour market, and also about the opinions and wishes of parents about family policy, we conducted a survey in 2001/2002. The questionnaire was sent to mothers and fathers of children born in 1999. Men who have been on parental leave were especially picked from the NII registers to be included in our sample, as they are such a small group that they usually fall out of representative survey samples. We got 3295 replies from mothers and 1413 replies from fathers.

From the basis of previous research, the questionnaire was designed to capture the relevant preconditions as well as consequences of leave from a gender perspective. This means we are using existing social categories and concepts as a basis of the analysis and new ways to perceive and understand gender and parenthood could be excluded from the analysis (Alasuutari 1993, Lehto 1998). On the other hand, we have developed several new questions that have not been used in previous surveys, for example regarding the negotiation of sharing leave between parents. We have tried to minimize problems related to the different readings and interpretations of the questions by respondents with different background and position by formulating the questions as unambiguously and as concretely as possible, using everyday language. Open ended questions were also included to leave room for the parents' complementing experiences and considerations which can help us develop also new questions and concepts.

In this paper, my intention is to discuss the sharing of parental leave from a gender order perspective: how power relations between men and women in society as well as in the family are related to the negotiations and the division of labour between parents in taking parental leave. The empirical material provides information about different aspect related to the decision making of which parent will take parental leave. These aspects include, for example, knowledge or lack of it about the existing possibilities; discussion or lack of it between spouses about the take-up of leave; calculations on the economic consequences of taking leave; individual needs for a break from work; experiences of the tightness of work requirements; experiences of social support or lack of it at the workplace.

Theoretical frame: gender order

Feminist theory of gender relations and critical studies on men and masculinities have given new perspectives for studying not only the position and experiences of women but also men: how ideas of masculinity are produced as part of the socially constructed gender order (Connell 1995).

What is "gender order"? Ways of thinking about gender, unspoken rules and expectations regarding men and women; mutual obligations, rights and practices related to gender change in time and place, along with economic, political and religious development in society (Rantalaiho 1993, Connell 1995). Gender as a
social and cultural construction is produced and reproduced by women and men in various spheres of life. The development of different forms of masculinity is related to the interplay of policy conditions and structures in society as well as the action and choices of individual men.

Bob Connell (2000) theorises the gender order as consisting of four dimensions of gender relations: the division of labour; the symbolic gender relations; the emotional relations and desires (cathexis) and the power relations between men and women (and between men, between women). The gender order is a complex configuration produced by the interaction of these levels and dimensions.

In this paper, I will concentrate on two of these dimensions and the relations between them in the context of work-family reconciliation and especially parental leave: the division of labour and power relations between men and women.

**Previous research on the division of labour and power in parental relations**

The gendered division of labour related to parenthood and employment is the most commonly studied dimension of parental leave and childcare in Finland: there are reports on who does what and how often (e.g. Melkas 1998 & 2001; Lammi-Taskula 2000; Niemi & Pääkkönen 2001). In short, the results of these studies show that men's share in carework is rather modest, even though some positive development is recognised. According to Nordic studies, the length of the father's parental leave is related to the division of labour in household duties between the parents. The longer the father’s leave, the more equal the sharing of responsibilities in childcare, cleaning, cooking, washing and shopping (Brandth & Överli 1998, Haas & Hwang 1999).

Nordic studies refer to the labour market position and to the socio-economic resources such as education and income level of fathers and mothers as relevant for the sharing of parental responsibilities such as men's take-up of parental and child care leave (e.g. Sääntti 1990, Christoffersen 1990, Carlsen 1994, Andersen et al 1996, Brandth & Överli 1998, Bekkengen 2000). These resources can be seen as a basis for power: for defining and negotiating common solutions in the family that are in line with one's own desires and interests, as well as presenting needs and demands at the workplace. Indicators of struggle and conflict can help to find the relevant situations and sore points of power relations.

In her analysis on the arguments of sharing or not sharing parental leave between the parents Riikka Kivimäki (2001) wonders if this issue is negotiated at all in families. The primary argument seems to be the mother's "choice". The mother's work or her desire to work is hardly ever mentioned in the answers concerning the mother's staying at home on leave, whereas the father's work was often described at demanding. Jouko Huttunen (2001) has pointed out that at the same time as the participation of fathers in childcare is seen as something very positive, a man who takes his fatherhood seriously and shares care responsibilities with the mother is often a lonely character in both working life and in his peer group of friends and neighbours.
Workplace culture and practices are, in the light of Nordic research on men and parental leave, relevant for fathers of young children either as an obstacle for taking parental leave or as supporting men to take leave. Differences in the power relations exist according to the degree of modernisation of work (Holter & Aarseth 1994, Bekkengen 1999). At workplaces with traditional work culture where leave is seen as a statutory right and conflicts are based on hierarchies, especially managers of older generation may oppose men's right to take parental leave. In modern, dynamic workplaces with more emphasis on individual expertise and responsibility parental leave may be interpreted as a sign of weaker commitment. As there can be both individually and collectively organised tasks – specialist and experts as well as those whose work can more easily be replaced - in the same workplace, the practices in regard to parental leave vary according to the position and situation of the person.

According to our study of Finnish workplaces, fathers of young children expected their colleagues and also their superiors to accept a short, temporary child care leave if their child got ill (Lammi-Taskula 2000). A longer parental leave by men was most positively met by middle-aged white-collar women, whereas blue-collar employees were more conservative as were also the parents of young children (Salmi & Lammi-Taskula 1999).

The formal gender neutrality of parental leave means that there is more room to negotiation of take-up than in the case of gender-specific forms of leave (maternity and paternity leave). The father's "quota" of parental leave as a non-transferrable entitlement is also gender specific. Despite the fact that the father's work situation has been reported in the Nordic research as one of the most usual obstacles for men's take up of longer parental leave, the take-up of the "daddy-quota" has been high. This indicates that this kind of a gender-specific possibility helps fathers to negotiate parental leave with their employers as well as with their spouse.

Empirical sketches of fathers taking leave

In Nordic studies, the relation of the take-up of paternal and parental leave by fathers has been shown to be related to not only the father's own socio-economic position but also quite strongly to the position of his spouse, the mother of the child (see e.g. Säntti 1990, Carlsen 1994, Brandth & Överli 1998, Bekkengen 1999, Olsen 2000, Plantin 2001) . Our data shows the same relations: men with high education, working in expert positions have more often than other men taken leave, especially if their spouse also has an academic degree and a good position in the labour market.

Paternity leave

The differences in the take-up of paternity leave are rather small between socio-economic groups. This means that the 1-3 week paternity leave is taken by all kinds of men regardless of their educational or occupational background. I have called this the "every man's mass movement" (Lammi-Taskula 1998).
Since all fathers have not, however, taken the total three week paternity leave, we wanted to see if there are particular fields were the "mass movement" is not as common as it is in the general picture. And are there perhaps certain fields where the longest possible paternity leave has become a common practice? Our data shows that the three-week paternity leave is most common in the female-dominated health sector, but also on the more male-dominated field of technology. As a matter of fact, a father who does not take any paternity leave is most rare in the technology field.

It is most typical not to take any paternity leave in the field of agriculture, where fathers can combine work and family life in a different manner than the average employee can. Fathers working in the academia also pass their paternity leave more than others. This can be due to a high degree of flexibility in working hours and the possibilities to spend more time at home without taking formal leave.

*Parental leave*

The mean length of the fathers' parental leave in the data is 10 weeks. Typically, the leave has been no longer than two months. The academic education of the father as well as his spouse is a decisive factor for the father's take-up of parental leave. Expert position seems to offer the most positive conditions for leave, and also men in superior or managerial positions have been able to take a month or two off their work. It is the blue-collar fathers that take parental leave less often than others. I will return to the possible economic reasons behind the blue-collar men's difficulties to take leave.

Also the sector of employment is relevant for the father's take-up of parental leave. It seems to be easier for the men working for the state to take parental leave than it is for others, especially for those working in the privat sector. Men working in the social sector probably benefit from the fact that parental leave is a common phenomena in this female-dominated field. But also men doing administrative managerial work - not known for the care rationality - have more often taken parental leave than most other men. Could this be related to the burdening work load that the fathers like to escape, or perhaps to the flexibility and possibilities for home-based work with the help of communication technology? These questions will be clarified by looking at the different reasons given by the parents for their chosen division of the take-up of parental leave.

*Arguments for sharing (or not sharing) parental leave*

Previous studies in the Nordic countries have listed various reasons and factors related to the fact that fathers have taken so little parental leave that is in principle meant for both parents. These reasons include material, ideological, social and personal aspects: economy, work situation, lack of information, priorities and orientations (Högeland 1996). One of the conclusions has been that despite the formal gender neutrality of parental leave schemes, leave is still widely seen as "the mother's business".

Even if the fathers' right to leave is a more recent phenomena than the mothers' right (maternity leave was introduced in 1964 and paternity leave 1978), paternity leave has however been a possibility in Finland for 25 years and father's parental leave for 18 years. Is it possible that fathers (and their spouses) who live in an
information society still are not aware of these rights and possibilities? Or perhaps they do not discuss different options even if they know about them?

According to our data, the lack of information does not seem to be any major explanation for men not taking parental leave. Also in those families where the father had only taken paternity leave, three out of four respondents said they knew it would have been possible for the father to take also parental leave. The difference between those who had taken parental leave and those who had not taken it lies not so much in knowledge but more in reflecting and negotiating that knowledge between the parents. Discussion between spouses as well as calculations have a strong correlation with the father's take-up of paternal leave. Maybe the calculations showed that the father's leave was not economically unbearable after all?

An important factor related to the take-up of parental leave by men was the experience of leave as a long-awaited break from work. These families thought the father also had a right to step out of the vicious circle of working life?

Factors related to the sharing of parental leave between mother and father

Those fathers who had not taken any parental leave often said it would have been difficult for them to take such a long leave of absence from work. They rarely mentioned the employer's comments, however. This points to the work-related obstacles being more based on the father's own evaluation than his superior's. Also the father's responsibility as the breadwinner was mentioned more often by the non-leave fathers than by their spouses.

Breastfeeding is often mentioned as an obstacle for the father's parental leave. Mothers are encouraged in Finland to breastfeed according to the WHO recommendations: first 4 to 6 months of the baby's life exclusive breastfeeding (no other food but mother's milk) and after that partial breastfeeding until the child is
two or older. According to the latest studies, breastfeeding has become more common to some extent, but still only 14% of four-month-old babies were exclusively breastfed in 2000 (Hasunen 2002).

In our data, breastfeeding does not seem to be an obstacle for the fathers to take parental leave. The importance of breastfeeding has not decided the take-up of leave but more the timing of the father's leave period. Nine out of ten fathers who mentioned breastfeeding as an argument in deciding about leave said that their spouse wished to breastfeed exclusively no longer than six months. The father had taken parental leave when the baby was no longer dependent of the mother's milk's immediate availability.

In the attitudes related to the mother's role and her responsibility in childcare, the difference between leave-taking-fathers and non-takers was clear: those who did not take parental leave frequently put forward the argument of the mother's care task. These traditional attitudes were, however most common among mothers themselves. The younger the mother was, the more she saw childcare as the mother's task. This attitude was related to the education level as well as to the occupational position of the mother: it was strongest among women in lower white-collar positions. Women with an academic degree saw less often childcare as the mother's responsibility. There was a strong relation between the mother's attitudes and the take-up of parental leave by her spouse.

The different aspects of negotiating leave - knowing about possibilities, discussing leave with spouse and calculating the costs - are related to the socio-economic background of fathers, especially to age and education. Young fathers seem to have known less about their possibilities for leave and they also report discussing parental leave less often with their spouse than older fathers. The relative lack of knowledge can be explained by the fact that for almost half of the youngest fathers (those under 30), the child born in 1999 was the first and only one. Three out of four fathers who were 40+ years old had more than one child, half of them had at least three children. The father's possibilities had perhaps become more familiar as they got more children.

The higher the education level, the more the fathers had known about their possibilities and the more they had also discussed these possibilities with their spouse. Men working for the state were better aware of their possibilities and had more often discussed them with their spouse compared to others, especially those working in the private sector.

Calculating the economic costs of the father's parental leave was most common among the under-30-year old fathers and among those with less education or those in a blue-collar position, whose income was in average lower than other men's and who also often had low-income spouses.
Policy conclusions: Will the daddy month encourage men in Finland to take parental leave?

Our material was collected about a year before the new legislation with the daddy month and with part-time parental leave was implemented. Parents of young children were not particularly interested at that time about taking part-time leave or making part of the existing parental leave non-transferrable. They wished to see the possible father's quota as an extension of the existing leave period, which was partly how it was implemented, too. (Salmi & Lammi-Taskula 2002.)

The take-up of the daddy month means that the mother needs to go back to her work or studies or become officially unemployed (or stay at home with no benefits) when at least two weeks are left of the parental leave period in order for the father to take the remaining period and get his two-week bonus period. A father's one-month leave period has this far been quite a rare phenomenon in the Finnish worklife. Even if paternity leave has become a kind of a matter of course, not all fathers take the maximum of three weeks of paternity leave.

Men with high education level have taken more often parental leave than others, and their leave periods have typically been 1-2 months long. Academic men often have an academic spouse who holds less traditional attitudes about motherhood and care responsibility. As it will probably be most difficult for the highly educated women to take a long leave from their expert work, it could be expected that it will be in this group that we are going to see the take-up of the new daddy month. And even though women with high education are among the most eager breastfeeders, our data shows that this does not need to be an obstacle for sharing parental leave.

Economic obstacles for the father's take-up of parental leave were most common among young blue-collar families in our material. Those with less education and a weaker position in the labour market were the ones who made more calculations than others. A higher parental leave benefit would advance the take-up of the new leave possibilities by fathers in this group. They as well as those working in expert and white-collar positions would benefit from a more long-span perspective in worklife and a work culture with more flexibility according to care needs.

Theoretical conclusions: to be written
Litterature:

Bekkengen, Lisbeth: Män som ”pappor” och kvinnor som ”föräldrar”. Kvinnovetenskaplig tidskrift 1/1999.


