

Chapter 1

Fathers on Leave Alone: Setting the Scene

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1.1 Main Aims and Theoretical Issues

The aim of this book is to present original research findings on the experiences of fathers taking “home alone leave” in different country policy contexts. It seeks to illuminate fathering experiences of work-family balance and the gendered divisions of parental responsibilities in diverse countries across Europe, North America and Asia, specifically Japan.

Providing care for a newborn child and negotiating work-life balance during the first years of a child’s life may be seen as crucial life events in the transition to fathering and mothering. To support this transition to parenthood, public policies in countries across the world have developed earnings-compensated leave systems as well as daycare services in order to help parents reconcile work and care responsibilities (Kamerman and Moss 2009; ILO 2014; Moss 2015). Maternity leave was the first type of leave to be introduced and developed. However, over the last 30 years parental as well as individual entitlements have been introduced, thereby providing diverse and more flexible leave options to be negotiated by parents after the birth of a child. In particular, there has been a continuing enhancement over the last two decades of fathers’ entitlements in order to increase men’s participation in the care of their newborn children (Geisler and Kreyenfeld 2011; Moss and Deven 2015).

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Depending on eligibility criteria and type of leave scheme, fathers may be on leave part-time or full-time, at the same time as the mother or alone after the mother returns to work. An increasing number of studies are examining fathers' use of leave entitlements, the factors shaping take-up, and the impact of leave use on family relationships, division of housework and the care of children (e.g. Lammi-Taskula 2008; Haas and Hwang 2008; Huerta et al. 2013; Buening 2015). However, little is still known about fathers' understandings and experiences of leave or their perceptions of the consequences of leave (Deven 2005; Seward et al. 2006; McKay and Doucet 2010). In particular, there is scant evidence on the lived *experience of fathers taking up the more radical form of "leave alone"*, implying daylong care while the mother works. Also lacking in the research literature is a *comparative perspective* seeking to explore and compare father's experiences of leave alone in differing policy contexts. Although there has been some pioneering research on fathers' taking leave alone in a few national settings (e.g. Norway – Brandth and Kvande 2002; Sweden – Chronholm 2002; Portugal -Wall 2014), research has yet to draw the evidence together and to take an international comparative perspective.

Research on this twenty-first century form of father-care raises four important theoretical issues which will be tackled in this book. The first is whether this type of leave for fathers tends to shift parental care away from the male breadwinner-female carer model, thereby reinforcing gender equity both in paid and unpaid work. Welfare state literature and gender studies (e.g. Sainsbury 1996; Hobson 2002) aiming to incorporate gender into the former reveal complex and often contradictory consequences of leave policies. For example, paid leave schemes and childcare services are generally seen to strengthen women's ties to paid work by raising female employment rates, reducing new mothers' labour-market exits, and decreasing their job turnover (Jaumotte 2004). However, leave provisions of longer duration are also shown to have negative effects on women's employment by eroding their human capital and making them less attractive to employers, when compared to the male workforce (e.g. Datta Gupta et al. 2008).

Similarly, entitlements for fathers and policy measures promoting the gender sharing of leave have also revealed complex consequences. Individual and non-transferable leaves of fathers are generally seen to strengthen men's ties to unpaid work by involving men in care work, promoting father-child bonds and allowing men to increase their ability to reconcile work and family life (e.g. Haas and Hwang 2008; Eydal et al. 2015). On the other hand, the evidence base is still mixed on the scale and sustainability of changes within families associated with fathers' use of leave.

A second issue is whether leave-taking by fathers is shifting the perceptions and practices of fathering and mothering and in which directions. The literature on fathering and fatherhood underlines a strong trend, in all developed countries, towards ideals and practices of more involved fatherhood (Hobson 2002; Lamb 2010). Nevertheless, the debate on what constitutes the growing involvement of fathers in parental care reveals different approaches, with some scholars emphasizing the extent to which states and societies support fathers as secondary caregivers (rather than questioning their role as breadwinners), while others underline the role

of policy in granting men entitlements to “equal” parenthood, thereby recognising men’s competences for primary caregiving (Holter 2012; Hobson 2014). These two perspectives do not necessarily clash. As some research literature has pointed out, changing policies and social contexts do not always have clear-cut effects. A common trend towards changing perceptions and practices of fatherhood is not necessarily linked to gender equality in parental roles. In fact, *involved fatherhood* and *gender egalitarianism* may emerge as different dimensions and have to be conceptualized and analysed separately.

The question of changing fatherhood is related to a third, complex theoretical issue: conceptualizing the nature and type of social processes underlying the experiences of fathers on leave alone. Differing approaches and concepts are related to different disciplines (Oechsle and Hess 2012; Cabrera and Tamis-LeMonda 2013). Approaches drawing on disciplines such as child development and social psychology focus on specific processes and dimensions of parenting such as bonding, personal/physical caregiving (sometimes labelled as ‘direct’ care), indirect caregiving (e.g. coordination of education or childcare). Literature drawing on sociology of family and the transition to parenthood, in particular those linked to qualitative approaches, focus on processes such as the ‘negotiation’ of time and engagement in caregiving, the ‘doing’ of daily parenting, the ‘learning’ process related to the acquisition of new emotional and practical competences and the ‘individualisation’ process leading to more autonomous relationships and parent-child interactions which are less mediated by others or by social norms (Kaufmann 1996; Morgan 1992). Gender studies, on the other hand, have highlighted the processes of ‘doing’ and ‘undoing’ gender, thereby suggesting that gender equality in parental roles depends strongly not only on policy and normative context but also on the agency and personal perspectives of the social actors themselves (Butler 2004; Walby 1997).

A fourth and last issue is related to the impact of differing policy and social context on the understandings and experiences of fathers taking leave alone. Comparative social policy literature has shown that states reveal different levels of attention to fatherhood, work-family balance and gender equality in early parenthood. Moving beyond the typology of welfare regimes proposed by welfare studies (Esping-Andersen 1990), leave policy research has pinpointed a variety of leave policy models, some focusing clearly on gender equality, some promoting the ideal of choice for parents rather than gender equality in parenting and others still promoting ideals of mother-centred care and secondary female breadwinning (based on part-time employment or female exiting from the labour market while children are young) (Wall and Escobedo 2013). Thus fathers who take leave alone may do so on the basis of a long-standing leave policy model promoting equal parenting (e.g. Nordic countries), of more recent policies promoting the involvement of fathers (e.g. Canada, Portugal) or of weaker state-supported solutions (e.g. France; UK); some may also take leave alone as a private family-based solution, opting out of the labour market in a context where the social legitimacy and support of new fathering practices is extremely low or non-existent (e.g. Switzerland, Japan). Policy context has been shown to impact strongly on social norms and practices, within families

and in society at large, regarding father's roles and the organisation of work-family balance (Gregory and Milner 2008; Hobson 2014; Rush 2015). The lived experiences of fathers and the consequences of leave, as understood by fathers themselves, will be also be influenced by these differences in leave policy regimes and their implication for paid and unpaid work.

A life course perspective has the potential to connect individual pathways, adult and child, with policy and societal contexts in specific historical junctures and so link the theoretical approaches described above (Elder and Shanahan 2006). Men's family and work trajectories, choices and actions are constrained by policy and societal contexts and also intersect with their partner's and child's lives (Shanahan and Macmillan 2008). That is, the phenomenon of fathers taking parental leave alone is embedded in an interconnected set of societal and personal life course processes.

In summary, the first objective of the book is to portray men's experiences of home alone leave and how it affects their lives and family gender roles in different policy contexts. A second objective is to explore how this unique parental leave design is implemented in these contrasting policy regimes. The authors' theoretical frameworks draw on three major theoretical strands: social policy, in particular the literature on comparative leave policy developments; family and parenting studies, in particular the analysis of family processes related to parent-child interactions and the care of young children; and gender studies, in particular the literature focusing on the gendered divisions of work and care and recent shifts in the gendering/de-gendering of work-family balance.

1.2 Developments in Fathers and Leave Policies: Research Messages

National policy developments provide fathers with different entitlements and opportunities for work-family balance, encapsulated by Gregory and Milner (2008) as "fatherhood regimes". In this book, we compare specific countries (Norway, Sweden, Finland, Iceland, Canada, Portugal) which have introduced generous fully-compensated leave entitlements for fathers, such as well-paid paternity leave and explicit father-targeted policy schemes (daddy months, bonus month) allowing fathers to take up one or more months of paid parental leave on a full-time or part-time basis, with countries where policy developments have focused weakly on the enhancement of fathers' entitlements to leave (UK, Spain, France, Switzerland, Japan). The former set have been characterised by O'Brien (2009) as a "premier league" in that they offer both high income compensation with father-care sensitivity design. Comparison between countries with different policy profiles and pathways allows us not only to understand the impact of social and policy context but also to explore how the latter influence fathers' experiences and their negotiation of leave with employers and within families.

Although Sweden was the first country in 1974 to introduce parental leave open to fathers as well as mothers, Norway was the first country in 1993 to reserve 4 weeks of well-paid parental leave exclusively for fathers – the non-transferable “daddy month” (Haas and Rostgaard 2011). Sweden and Iceland followed suit, and the so-called “fathers’ quota” came to symbolize the Nordic gender equality model (Eydal et al. 2015). Since then nearly all European countries and many others across the world, have introduced new individual and non-transferable leave rights for fathers, mainly in the form of ‘paternity leave’, that is the right to a few days of paid leave taken with the mother after childbirth (ILO 2014).

1.2.1 What Is Known About Fathers Taking Leave and Fathers Taking Leave Alone?

Despite early research (e.g. Haas 1992) empirical enquiry into the specific personal and family experiences and impact of maternal, paternal and paternity leave is still relatively undeveloped. There is still surprisingly little empirical research on what parents ‘do’ during parental leave and even less on what fathers ‘do’ (Deven 2005; Seward et al. 2006; Haas and Hwang 2008) and as such understanding the processes by which parental leave may operate to promote or hinder gender equity or child and family well-being are still unclear.

In addition, in attempting to understand the impact of parental leave policies there are important macro and micro-level methodological considerations. At a macro level, parental leave is a black box of diverse arrangements which vary both within and between countries despite common nomenclatures. Eligibility criteria also vary; although in general tend to exclude insecure and informal workers. Also in attempting to understand the specific impact of parental leave it is important to contextualize parental leave as part of societal level public investment. In most countries public investment in paid leave policies is often highly associated with more general public spending on family benefits as a proportion of GDP (Adema and Ali 2015). As such claims from macro-level studies of impact have been controversial, with pathways of influence difficult to disentangle, particularly as any gains can be linked to prior characteristics of fathers (gender egalitarian and child-oriented) rather than the policy itself. Methodological issues, for example about sample selectivity, are also relevant for micro-level analyses although qualitative research has the advantage of fine-tuned dimensional sampling not always available for large-scale administrative or survey data sets.

Where impact research does exist the focus has been mainly on the effects of maternity leave provision with several studies showing child health benefits for instance in immunization uptake and employment retention (Tanaka 2005; Han et al. 2009). Positive health gains for children are maximized when the maternity leave is: paid, provided in a job secure context and with a duration of at least 10 weeks.

In terms of fathers and leave, the logic has been that giving fathers the opportunity to spend more time at home through leave after childbirth should result in greater involvement in domestic life and childcare. More studies on fathers taking leave have been published over last decade spanning both comparative and within country policy analysis, particularly concerning implementation and impact at a macro-level (e.g. Nepomnyaschy and Waldfogel 2007; Huerta et al. 2010; Kotsadam and Finseraas 2011; Rege and Solli 2013; Buenning 2015). Research on fathers' lived experiences of leave-taking, the focus of this book, are relatively uncommon.

The Nordic countries have provided fertile ground for "before and after" studies of impact at a country level (Ekberg et al. 2005; Duvander and Johansson 2012) and more recently Germany, with its parental leave reform of 2007 which created a new incentive for men to take parental leave by introducing two well-remunerated daddy months (Schober 2014; Buenning 2015). The natural experiment paradigm, which has framed many of these studies, has produced evidence for greater engagement of fathers in the care of children after policy reforms, in comparison with father who do not take leave. For instance, Kotsadam and Finseraas (2011) found that men whose last child was born in the year after Norway's father quota introduction in 1993 reported 11% lower levels of conflict over household division of labour and were 50% more likely to share clothes washing than men whose last child was born just before the reform. However, there has been some concern that greater engagement by fathers who have taken leave may be short-lived rather than long-term and so have a weak impact on the gendering of care. Indeed German longitudinal analysis by Schober (2014) suggested that fathers increased their participation in childcare only temporarily during the first year after taking parental leave but subsequent research has suggested sustained longer term effects up until the third year of the child's life (Buenning 2015; Reimer et al. 2015).

Notably, Reimer et al.'s (2015) study also found a large effect of paid parental leave taken alone by the father. In particular, an observed relationship between fathers' use of leave and their time for childcare only persisted when at least one leave month was taken alone by the fathers: an important selection criterion for this book's qualitative sample. Both Buenning (2015) and Reimer et al.'s (2015) studies were able to use nationally representative German panel data sets (German Socio-economic panel and Families in Germany) which include item on duration and whether leave is taken alone or with a partner. Also the data sets allow the same fathers to be tracked before and after they take parental leave which enable exploration of selection effects.

Other country level natural experiments have assessed "duration" effects of fathers' leave on wide range of outcomes. In a further Norwegian case, it has been found that 4 weeks' exposure to the leave quota during a child's first year was associated with a 1–3% drop in fathers' earnings over the next 5 years (Rege and Solli 2013). In an another study of duration and fathers' engagement in childcare, research in Australia has found that taking some leave (2 or 4 weeks) increased the likelihood of fathers engaging in sole care at week-ends when the child was older 4–19 months (Hosking et al. 2010). Notably, studies are emerging about child outcomes of non-normative fathers with respect to parental leave in particular countries; for instance, Flacking et al. (2010) found that Swedish infants whose fathers did not take pater-

nity leave in the first year were significantly less likely to be breast fed at 2 and 6 months. Although the body of macro-level research is still emergent it does suggest that fathers' as well as mothers' leave-taking has direct as well as indirect influences on infants, family and work life. Moreover, there are indications that leave-taking alone by fathers may be especially salient in priming subsequent greater engagement in the care of infants.

It is our view that in order to understand *how* paternal leave-taking alone may have benefits for infants, gender equality and wider subjective well-being in families more qualitative research is needed, the objective of this book. Earlier qualitative studies have suggested that being home alone sensitises or enhances fathers' awareness of infant life "slow time" (Brandth and Kvande 2002) and other studies of fathers taking primary care of infants have found tendencies towards increased paternal happiness with increased time spent with the child (Lewis et al. 2009).

The studies presented in this book provide the first opportunity to explore a new form of "situated fathering" (Marsiglio et al. 2005) in a wide range of national policy and norm creating settings. In some of the countries profiled, a father's opportunity to take leave is an individual social right, independent of his partner, whereby in other contexts a father's access to parental leave is a second order entitlement, mediated by the child's mother. Contributors in the book portray how men's capacity to be involved in the care of infants is shaped by the policy contexts of leave policy and design, as well as gender cultures in the workplace and at home.

1.3 Methodological Approach and Research Design

Each national research team has adopted a similar qualitative approach to researching fathers who have recently taken leave alone. Drawing on a symbolic interactionist approach that prioritizes the agency and subjective perspectives of social actors (Finch and Mason 1993; Kaufmann 1996), in-depth interviews were carried out in all eleven countries with fathers who had taken leave alone for at least 1 month or, in some national contexts, with fathers who had taken leave alone part-time. All fathers belonged to dual earner couples in which fathers had taken recent (preferably over the last 3 years) leave for a newborn child.

Most national research teams drew on a common interview guide which was originally structured, tested and revised in the Portuguese project on fathers on leave alone (cf. Chap. 4). Each team adapted the formulation of the questions to national leave policies and context. The interview instrument included eight core topics acting as prompts for fathers' narratives: description of the leave taken; the decision to take leave in this way; the reactions of others (family; employers, colleagues and friends); the experience and practices of being on leave, including the first days alone and the weeks that followed; the consequences of leave (on fathers' work and family life, on the father-child relationship, on ideals and practices, on conjugal and family life in general); the meanings of fatherhood, motherhood, masculinity and femininity and attitudes to family and gender roles; opinions and critical assessment of the current leave policies.

A non-probability purposive sampling procedure was used to ensure participants were fathers who had taken leave alone for 30 or more days, although in some countries with minimalist parental leave provision for fathers, selection on this dimension of duration was not possible. Contacts were made through word of mouth (snowballing) and personal relationships. Formal contacts with firms in the private sector were made in some countries so as to bring in diversity of sectors of employment. In order to achieve variation in the lived experiences of fathers, the study aimed at sample sizes of 12–20 interviews (Ritchie and Lewis 2003). The interviews usually lasted between one and a half and 3 hours and responses were taped and fully transcribed. Only pseudonyms identify the respondents in order to maintain confidentiality.

1.4 Book Structure

The book consists of 13 chapters including the introduction which has presented some key contextual issues. In Chap. 2 Andrea Doucet examines significant theoretical challenges raised by the phenomenon of fathers taking parental leave alone, which are returned to by the editors in Chap. 14 when they review the research, policy and theoretical implications of main results. In Chaps. 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, and 13 the reader will discover the research findings on fathers taking leave alone from eleven different national policy contexts.

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