

# Report for the research project ‘Paternity leave: Impacts on male careers’

## Men’s parental leave in Sweden: policies, attitudes, and practices

Tobias Axelsson  
Örebro University, Sweden

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JOANNEUM RESEARCH Forschungsgesellschaft mbH  
POLICIES-Zentrum für Wirtschafts- und Innovationsforschung

**Office Vienna**

Haus der Forschung, Sensengasse 1  
A-1090 VIENNA, Austria  
Tel.: +43-1-581 7520  
E-Mail: [policies-wien@joanneum.at](mailto:policies-wien@joanneum.at)

*Tobias Axelsson*

e-mail: tobias.axelsson@oru.se

phone: + 46 19-301269

[www.oru.se/humus/tobias\\_axelsson/](http://www.oru.se/humus/tobias_axelsson/)

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**Projektleitung:**

Dr.in Helene Schiffbänker, [JOANNEUM RESEARCH Forschungsgesellschaft mbH](#)

**Projektpartner:**

[ÖGUT - Österreichische Gesellschaft für Umwelt und Technik](#)  
[Synthesis Forschung](#)  
[Universität Örebro, Schweden](#)

## **Foreword**

The following report on men's parental leave in Sweden has been written as part of the research project 'Paternity leave: Impacts on male careers', headed by Dr Helene Schiffbaenker at *Joanneum Research* in Vienna, Austria. The aim of this research project is to explore the impact of paternity leave on male career progression in an Austrian context. As the project is funded by the programme 'Sparkling Science', which encourages research in cooperation with schools and pupils, this research project (although not this specific report) is being carried out together with high school pupils.

Early on in the project, Schiffbaenker and colleagues wanted to include a research partner with knowledge about a country in which men have had the statutory right to parental leave for a longer period of time than Austria. They were kind enough to ask me. Thus, this report may serve as comparative material for the research project.

Although comparative studies on parental leave policies and practices is a growing field of interest, there is still much more work to be done. For example, a description and analysis of the state of the art in contemporary Sweden is lacking, although Sweden is often included in international comparative studies. Since many studies of fathers and parental leave in Sweden are written in Swedish, important dimensions of parental leave policies for fathers are lacking in previous comparative research.

After reading this report about the Swedish case, I hope that readers are able to draw at least some conclusions about how policies, attitudes, and practices related to men's parental leave can be understood, theorized and developed.

Örebro, Sweden, April 2014  
Tobias Axelsson

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## **Introduction**

More and more states support parents' caring responsibilities for their children through leave policies directed towards parents (Moss & Kamerman 2009; Moss 2013). Since Sweden introduced the first gender-neutral parental leave policy in 1974, many states have launched leave policies for parents: not only for mothers but also for fathers (O'Brien, Brandth & Kvande 2007). Leave policies for parents are, as Moss and Kamerman (2009: 1) have pointed out, 'a necessary part of the tool-kit for running a modern state.' There are several reasons for claiming this, since providing parents with job-protected leave has the following benefits: it creates opportunities for balancing paid work and family life; it strengthens parents' rights, especially those of working mothers, in relation to employers; and it may act in the best interests of both children and parents as it offers parents time off from work with economic compensation for creating social bonds with their children (Gíslason 2011). Moreover, and perhaps even more importantly, leave policies may have transformative effects on women's and men's life courses, femininities and masculinities, mothering and fathering, and gender relations – especially if they also encompass men/fathers. It should, however, be noted that leave policies for parents vary considerably between different states and societies in terms of types of leave, entitlements, duration, flexibility, and payment (see e.g. Moss & Kamerman 2009: 4). Also, one has to be aware that leave policies for parents form part of a broader family and social policy package (Duvander, Ferrarini & Thalberg 2005: 21). In the Swedish case, the gender-neutral parental leave scheme serves the dual earner/carer model, in which women and men are expected to share both paid work and caring responsibilities (Leira 2006: 29).

Although leave policies are important instruments for changing attitudes and practices related to social problems such as family–work balance, discrimination against parents (mostly mothers) as workers, and unequal gender relations, it would be misleading to regard them as political miracle cures. In many European countries, a substantial number of fathers report that they would like to be more involved in family life and that they are negatively affected by high demands in their work life (Hobson & Fahlén 2009; Holter 2007). Although the number of childcare facilities is growing, it is still the case that many parents, mainly mothers, cannot work as much as they want or need (Abendroth, van der Lippe & Maas 2012). Also, feminist researchers have questioned whether leave policies directed at both mothers *and* fathers really can transform or break down gendered barriers in working life, family life, and parenthood (Bekkengen 2002, 2006; Bjørnholt 2010, 2012; Leira 2002, 2006). Even in societies known for their progressive parenthood policies and relatively high levels of gender equality, 'a field such as caring for children [...] is strongly divided by gender' (Brandth & Kvande 2009: 186).

Regardless of this scepticism, one must acknowledge that societies like Sweden and its Nordic neighbours<sup>1</sup>, where gender-neutral leave policies have existed for decades, compared to other countries where such policies are missing or have only recently been introduced, have a higher proportion of mothers of young children in the labour force, a less (but still substantially)

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<sup>1</sup> Denmark, Finland, Iceland and Norway.

gendered division of labour in heterosexual coupledness and parental relations, and a wide acceptance of the goal of transforming fatherhood from a matter of providing 'cash' into providing 'care' (Bergman & Hobson 2002: 100; Hobson 2004).

Due to at least two social and political circumstances in the Nordic countries, i.e. their gender-equality politics and their welfare systems, these countries have often been included in comparative research on gender and welfare (see e.g. Ellingsæter & Leira 2006a; Kamerman & Moss 2009; Ostner & Schmitt 2008; Sümer 2009). In the light of this history, Ellingsæter & Leira (2006b: 2) raise an important question for comparative gender and policy research: 'Why consider the [Nordic] model – again?' Their answer is that the Nordic countries early on made parenthood and 'the family' into political concerns, and from the 1970s onwards these have been strongly related to gender equality policy and the making of 'social democratic'<sup>2</sup> welfare states. Without being naïve or patronising towards other countries, Ellingsæter and Leira describe these policies as more or less 'successful' (2006b: 3). Therefore, the Nordic countries can serve as illustrative examples of how gender relations, for example in parenting and in work organizations, may be influenced or changed by parenthood policies. This does not mean that the experiences of the Nordic countries<sup>3</sup> are directly transferable to other societies with different national, political, and historical contexts (see e.g. Pajumets 2010, 2012). But, as several European countries have been influenced by Nordic parenthood policies during the 2000s – for example Austria, Estonia and Germany – the 'Nordic model' is obviously worth considering in politics (Erler 2009; Gstrein 2012; Karu 2011; Pajumets 2012). Therefore, it is still highly relevant to draw on experiences from the Nordic countries regarding how parental leave policies, and especially leave for fathers, have been publicly motivated, politically enacted, and, of importance for this report, responded to by parents, work organizations and other public actors.<sup>4</sup>

## **1. Aim and research questions**

This report takes its points of departure in Sweden and, more specifically, in research on parental leave for fathers in Sweden. It summarizes and draws upon selected publications written in English, Swedish, and – in a few cases – Norwegian. It contributes to the research project 'Paternity leave: Impacts on male careers' by presenting previous research and discussing crucial

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<sup>2</sup> Whether the Nordic countries should still be considered as social democratic welfare states is debatable. Due to economic recession and neoliberal influences during the 1990s, Ellingsæter & Leira (2006b: 3) stress that '[t]he sustainability of a high-cost, universally oriented, egalitarian welfare state is increasingly in question.' Writing from a Swedish point of view, the continuous influence of neoliberal ideologies and conservative politics during the 2000s – including for example the marketization of education, social welfare and tax allowances – makes this a highly relevant question. Despite changes in the general welfare system, parental leave policy has not gone through any major changes.

<sup>3</sup> Of course, experiences within the Nordic countries vary, as do the policies as such and their history. For the purposes of this report, I am however emphasizing the similarities between the Nordic countries rather than the differences. For a similar approach, see Sümer (2009: 43).

<sup>4</sup> See Ellingsæter & Leira (2006b: 4), who describe 'politicising parenthood' as a threefold process including: 'the public motivation and mobilisation for reform of policies of parenthood; the political processes in which these policies are formulated, legislated and enacted; and, finally, the public and parental response to policy interventions, that may in turn feed back into public debate and political mobilisation, policy formulation and so on.'

political, societal, and research concerns related to men's parental leave in Sweden. Its aim is to give an account of policies, attitudes and practices related to parental leave for fathers in contemporary Sweden.

Regarding *policies*, the report starts by asking, rather descriptively:

- 1) How can contemporary parental leave legislation in Sweden be described from a gendered and a historical perspective?

Concerning *attitudes*, the report asks:

- 2) How are Swedish fathers on parental leave perceived and judged
  - a. in society in general?
  - b. in work organizations in particular?

Regarding *practices*, which are the report's main focus, the following questions are raised:

- 3) How do Swedish fathers use parental leave? with special reference to
  - a. length of leave
  - b. occupational differences
  - c. whether fathers are the main carers of children or not.
- 4) Why is men's uptake of parental leave considerably lower than women's even in a 'father-friendly' society such as Sweden?
- 5) How do Swedish men's careers develop after parental leave compared to women's?
- 6) How is the re-entering of the labour market organized in Sweden
  - a. on a legal level (concerning women and men)?
  - b. on an organizational level (concerning men)?

Finally, the report discusses the following question, which is more speculative and political in its nature:

- 7) What gendered challenges can be seen in the context of men's parental leave in Sweden?

## **2. The Swedish context: key concepts, legal framework and history**

When studying leave policies for parents, one needs to differentiate between at least three main types of leave: maternity leave, paternity leave, and parental leave. These concepts are seemingly self-explanatory, but every single type of leave possesses multiple meanings depending on national and political context. While maternity and paternity leave are directed towards mothers and fathers, respectively, parental leave is a gender-neutral form of entitlement, which thus can be used by both mothers and fathers.

The two most important regulations concerning parental leave in Sweden are the *Parental Leave Act* (SFS 1995:584) and the *Social Insurance Code* (SFS 2010:110). The Parental Leave Act specifies, for example, who is entitled to leave. Moreover, it describes different kinds of leave and lays out the rights of employers and employees. The Social Insurance Code describes

how public social insurance in Sweden will be administered on a more concrete level. One of its chapters is devoted to parental leave benefits and includes, for example, information about the length of paid leave, the level of economic compensation, and guidelines for the calculation of these benefits.

In Sweden, maternity leave, paternity leave, and parental leave are organized as shown in the table below. The table also includes other important aspects related to these leave policies, such as length of leave, payment, flexibility, and 'quotas'. Notice that the table focuses solely on *paid* leave benefits, the aim of which is to compensate parents for loss of income while caring for children instead of participating in paid work (which means that unpaid leave, paid temporary benefits such as sick leave, and other forms of financial support for children, parents, and families are excluded from the table).

Table 1: Provision of paid statutory leave for parents in Sweden<sup>5</sup>

Maternity leave	Paternity/ Partner leave	Parental leave			
		Length of leave	Payment	Flexibility	'Quota'
No	Yes: - 10 days	480 days: a) 390 days income related  b) 90 days flat rate	a) Income related: 80 % of income up to 935 SEK/day  b) Flat rate: 180 SEK/day	- Payment types: 1/8, 1/4, 1/2, 3/4 or full days can be paid. - Duration: until a child turns 8 or completes first year in school.	Yes: - 60 days for each parent

Sweden has no paid maternity leave, as illustrated in the first column, at least not formally speaking (see e.g. Duvander & Lammi-Taskula 2011: 37). However, the pregnancy benefit, introduced in 1980, for expectant mothers with physically demanding jobs, which may harm themselves and/or the baby, functions as a kind of maternity leave. It encompasses 50 earning-related benefit days, which may be used during the last two months of the pregnancy (Swedish Social Insurance Agency 2013a: 33). Moreover, the Parental Leave Act guarantees female employees seven weeks of leave before the expected date of childbirth and seven weeks after delivery. Thus, maternity leave, as it is described in the Parental Leave Act, can but does not have to be combined with paid parental leave (SFS 1995:584, §4).

<sup>5</sup> The table and text in this section of the report build mainly on information from the Swedish Social Insurance Agency. For a shorter, but also more detailed, overview, see Duvander & Haas (2013).



There is one type of leave that could be regarded as paternity/partner leave. It is named 'temporary parental benefit' and is added to the general parental leave system. It goes not solely to fathers but to any second parent, i.e. the partner (or another close person) of the woman giving birth. This leave type, also introduced in 1980, encompasses 10 income-related days, which have to be used within 60 days of the birth/adoption (adoptive parents get 5 days each) (Swedish Social Insurance Agency 2013a: 31). Among lay people, these benefit days are often called 'the ten "daddy days"'.

As the table and the discussion above illustrates, maternity and paternity leave are present only to a very low degree. This is because gender-neutral parental leave is the main basis of Swedish leave benefits for parents, and has been since 1974. When parental leave was introduced in that year, it replaced the former maternity benefit that was introduced in 1938 (Stanfors 2007: 232-233). As Klinth (2002) has shown, there were several political motivations behind the adoption of parental leave: Firstly, during the 'sex role debate' of the 1960s and 1970s it was argued, for example by liberal debaters and politicians, that women and men needed to broaden their 'roles'. Thus, a 'double emancipation' was needed: women had to be more involved in paid work while men took greater responsibility for childcare and household tasks. Secondly, gender-neutral parental leave could improve relations between children and their fathers (although this argument was rather downplayed as a whole). Thirdly, and most importantly, parental leave was one of the foundations of the social democratic government's gender equality politics during the 1970s. The primary aim of this political agenda was to increase female employment. Although parental leave for fathers was not totally insignificant in relation to this goal, providing state-subsidized childcare services was seen as a more efficacious way to go. The radical idea of double emancipation, here represented by the phrase 'getting mummy a job and leaving daddy with the children', turned into a more national economically framed goal that was easier to realize: 'getting mummy a job and getting children a day-care placement' (Klinth 2002: 202, my translation<sup>6</sup>).

Now, returning to the table above, since 2002 parental leave insurance has consisted of 480 benefit days, of which 390 are income related (up to a limit), and the remaining 90 are paid at a flat rate (180 SEK/20 €<sup>7</sup> per day). The income-related compensation is just below 80 % of a person's income, up to a certain ceiling, which in 2012 was 444 000 SEK/50 047 €/year. This means that the largest possible payment for one day of compensation is currently 944 SEK/106 € During the years between 1974 and 2002, benefit days have been gradually added. In 1974, parental insurance comprised 180 days, which was later increased to 210 days (in 1976), 270 days (in 1978), 360 days (in 1986), 450 days (in 1989), and – as of now – 480 days (since 2002). Unlike the number of benefit days, the level of compensation has not increased in the same linear way. Rather, it has varied depending on the economic climate. For example, in 1974 the benefit

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<sup>6</sup> In the original (Swedish), the whole sentence goes: 'Skaffa mamma jobb och göra pappa med barn gled över i skaffa mamma jobb och skaffa barnen dagisplats.'

<sup>7</sup> SEK are converted into EUR based on the average exchange rate during February 2014, at <http://www.riksbank.se/en/Interest-and-exchange-rates/Monthly-aggregate-Exchange-rates/?y=2014&m=2&s=Comma#search>, rounded down/up to the nearest 1 EUR.

comprised 90 % of the wage. Between 1996 and 1998, during a period of economic downturn, the compensation was reduced to 75 % of the wage. In 1998, this was increased to 80 % (Statistics Sweden 2012: 44–46; Swedish Social Insurance Agency 2013a: 22; Swedish Social Insurance Agency's webpage, [www.forsakringskassan.se](http://www.forsakringskassan.se), as of 28 March 2013).

Besides its gender-neutral character, the large number of benefit days, and the high level of economic compensation, the Swedish parental leave policy is also a very flexible system. On the one hand, this creates many alternatives for parents. On the other hand, it is quite complex. Benefit days can be paid until a child turns eight or completes his/her first year in school. Moreover, benefit can be paid for either a full day or part of a day (one-eighth, one-quarter, one-half, or three-quarters of a day). Altogether, this means that a parent can prolong his/her leave period by, for example, claiming economic compensation for fewer days than he/she is actually on leave. Another alternative for a parent is to work part-time at the same time as he/she receives partial parental benefit (Swedish Social Insurance Agency 2013a: 22). Together with some of the regulations stipulated in the Parental Leave Act – which gives parents the right to stay at home during the first 18 months of a child's life (with or without parental leave benefit) and makes it possible for parents to reduce their working hours to one-quarter of normal (also with or without parental leave benefit) – the parental leave policy system in Sweden must, together with its Nordic neighbours, be considered as one of the most generous and flexible leave schemes in the world (Duvander & Lammi-Taskula 2011).

Right from the earliest days of parental leave insurance, during its establishment in the 1970s, some groups – for example, lobby groups and liberal politicians – were discussing whether some of the benefit days should be reserved for fathers (Chronholm 2009: 232; Klinth 2002: 195). However, this did not come about until 1995, when a centre-right government introduced the first quota, 'meaning that only one parent is able to take advantage of [paid parental leave]' (Duvander & Lammi-Taskula 2011: 38). At first, the quota consisted of 30 days, but in 2002, under a social democratic government, another 30 days were added, which means that out of the 480 benefit days, 60 of them are not transferable to the other parent. Even though the quota comprises mothers as well as fathers, it is often (wrongly) called 'fathers' quota' or 'fathers' months'. The political message in having the quota encompass both sexes, Duvander and Lammi-Taskula state, is to signal that 'parents are seen as equal caregivers to the child they have together, and that both are given the opportunity to serve as the main caregiver during the quota period, even if the other parent will perhaps end up using a greater share of parental leave overall' (2011: 38). Moreover, Duvander and Lammi-Taskula argue that quotas for fathers may challenge how women and men in heterosexual couplehood and parenthood divide labour. One could say that quotas function as a cautious way of governing: as a form of '[promoting fathercare] by the use of gentle force' (Leira 2006: 39). Through quotas, seemingly private and family-related matters like caring for children and doing household work are turned into political and societal issues.

During the last few years, the centre-right coalition, which has been in power since 2006, has made a few revisions to parental leave policies and other family-related benefits (see Lundqvist

2011, Ch. 5, for an overview). To increase men's use of parental leave, a 'gender-equality bonus' was introduced in 2008. If parents with joint custody share benefit days equally, they receive a daily bonus of 50 SEK each (Swedish Social Insurance Agency 2013a: 23). The same year as the gender-equality bonus was adopted, it became optional for municipalities to introduce a 'childcare subsidy' (or 'cash-for-care scheme') for children between one and three years old of a maximum 3000 SEK per month (Statistics Sweden 2012: 46). The most recent change to parental leave insurance is 'double days', which could be explained as follows: 'The main rule is that parental benefit may not be paid to both parents for the same child and period. As of 1 January 2012, however, parents can receive parental benefit simultaneously for up to 30 days until a child's first birthday' (Swedish Social Insurance Agency 2013a: 22).

I would like to emphasize that recent changes in parental benefits – the 'gender-equality bonus', 'childcare subsidy', and 'double days' – altogether illustrate the compromising and contradictory nature of parenthood politics in contemporary Sweden. Firstly, regarding the gender-equality bonus, one could make a comparison with the role of quotas. If quotas are regarded as a 'gentle force', the gender-equality bonus is more of a 'gentle incentive'. Clearly, bonuses are less intrusive and challenging as political interventions than quotas. Secondly, when the childcare subsidy was (re)introduced<sup>8</sup>, it was a result of negotiations between the Christian Democrats (who pushed for it) and the other three parties<sup>9</sup> of the centre-right coalition (which originally were against it). Although the cash-for-care scheme is a voluntary benefit at the municipality level, which has only been introduced in approximately 40 % of municipalities, it may be seen as a (symbolic) violation of the 'dual-earner family policy model'. When adding such a home-care based benefit into this model – a model which is characterized by low general family support and high support for dual earners (see e.g. Ferrarini 2003: 14; Leira 2006: 28–29) – some of the strongest (social democratic) ideological foundations within Swedish parenthood policies become blurred. Thirdly, allowing for 'double days' also breaks, at least partly, with the idea that both parents should engage in paid work.

Although recent changes in parental leave insurance may be minor adjustments in a relatively stable and generous dual-earner family model, my conclusion is that parenthood policies have been de-radicalized and have become more conservative in nature since the centre-right coalition was elected in 2006. Still, parental leave insurance has been left relatively untouched during the last year, and it would probably mean political suicide to make any major revisions in such a beneficial and popular insurance. Parental leave insurance is perceived as a 'social right' among parents in general: as one of several claims parents can make on the welfare state (Leira 2006: 46–47). Therefore, I do think Chronholm (2009: 239) is right when he points out that 'Swedish parental leave can be regarded as a stable system that will probably remain and develop in the future, irrespective of which government is in power.'

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<sup>8</sup> During a few months in 1994, a cash-for-care scheme existed (see Lundqvist 2011: 123 for a short discussion).

<sup>9</sup> The Centre Party, The Liberal Party, The Moderate Party.

### **3. Attitudes to fathers on parental leave**

In many societies men's practices and societal ideas regarding men and masculinities are to a large extent related to providing money. Thus, being the main breadwinner in 'the family' is an essential part of many men's identities as gendered beings. In other words: men's construction of themselves as men is often done in relation to both working life and family life. However, these structural and gendered conditions, which divide societies in terms of private/public, unpaid/paid work, 'feminine'/'masculine' etc., are changing. There are several reasons for this, for example: women's greater participation in paid work; lower birth rates; feminist mobilization; migration; economic crises; and changes in government policies on families, parenthood, reproductive rights, sexualities, and gender equality.

Focusing here on leave policies for parents, the introduction of paid leave for fathers is, more or less, a questioning of the gender division between parenting and paid work. Policies aiming to expand gender roles, or to reverse them in some sense, may be met by different responses in different times and societies. While parental leave for fathers may be met by resistance and scepticism – as something that de-masculinizes men and disrupts the mother-child dyad – it can also be embraced and welcomed (Brandth & Kvande 2013; Pajumets 2010, 2012). Very generally speaking, societal attitudes towards parental leave for fathers in contemporary Sweden are rather positive, although that is not the whole picture, as I will show and discuss below.

#### *General attitudes: politics, surveys, interview studies*

Sweden is, politically and ideologically speaking, a 'father-friendly society' (Hobson 2004; Smith & Williams 2007). 'Father friendliness', as a term, is parallel to 'women friendliness' (Hernes 1987) and 'mother friendliness' (Hobson 2004): two similar terms underlying women's double roles as economic providers and carers. Father friendliness, then, shall be understood as fathers' opportunities to 'combine work on the labour market with care responsibility in the dual-earner family model' (2004: 100<sup>10</sup>). In Sweden, fathers not only have the *opportunity* to engage in both paid work and caring for children, but they are also *expected* to do so. In other words, there is strong ideological support for caring and nurturing fatherhood in which men are providing for their children in a way similar, although not exactly equivalent, to women.

Staying on a political level, following on from the positive attitudes towards fathers' involvement in their children's lives more generally, it is not surprising that support for parental leave for men is strong in contemporary Swedish politics. Out of the eight parties in parliament, only two – The Christian Democrats (socially conservative) and The Swedish Democrats (nationalist/socially conservative) – would like to abolish the quota in the parental leave insurance. This means that The Christian Democrats is the only party in the centre-right coalition that rejects the quota, while the others – The Centre Party, The Liberal Party, and The Moderate Party – want to keep it. The remaining three parties would like to expand the quota: The Social Democrats suggest that the quota should be extended by one month (for both mothers and

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<sup>10</sup> In the original (Swedish): '[...] förmågan att kombinera arbete ute på arbetsmarknaden med vårdansvaret i modellens tvåförsörjarfamilj.'

fathers) and that in the long run parental leave insurance should be divided into three parts (this is 'the Icelandic model': 1/3 for each parent, and 1/3 for the parents to share as they like); The Green Party also supports the '1/3-model'. The most radical party on this issue, though, is The Left Party, which suggests that the benefit days should be shared equally between the parents.<sup>11</sup>

The support for men's parental leave on a political/ideological level is also mirrored in surveys of attitudes to gender roles in general and to parental leave in particular. For example, in a governmental report from 2005, on an overhaul of parental leave insurance, the results from a survey of 1000 parents (500 mothers and 500 fathers) with children between 1½ and 3 years old showed that mothers and fathers generally think that fathers should take parental leave:

Table 2: Should fathers take parental leave?

All fathers should take some paternity leave (beyond 10 days in connection with childbirth). 'Agree completely' corresponds to a 5, and 'do not agree at all' corresponds to a 1. %						
	1	2	3	4	5	Do not know
Women	3	4	5	12	75	1
Men	4	4	5	9	76	1

Source: SOU 2005:73, appendix 10, p. 311<sup>12</sup>

Although the attitudes in this survey support fathers' uptake of leave, it is at the same time obvious that mothers and fathers are not perceived or judged by the same moral and gendered compass. On the one hand, it is a common belief that it is important for fathers to be the main carers during a certain amount of time while they are on parental leave. Gradually reserving days for each parent is also accepted by a majority of parents in the survey. On the other hand, family and mother-centred attitudes are prominent, which become visible in the following general beliefs and opinions: families should decide without the involvement of the state how parental leave is shared; quotas for parental leave days are not supported; the mother is more important during the time a parent can take parental leave; the first period of parental leave should be used by the mother (SOU 2005:73, pp. 311–313). The relatively strong support for how Swedish parental leave insurance is constructed fits together well with previous research, which has shown that 'attitudes of individuals in different countries correlate with family policy structure in the same countries' (Duvander, Ferrarini and Thalberg 2005: 5). Moreover, I would like to add that, considering the influential and persistent ideas and myths around motherhood and the mother-child dyad, the strong support for fathers nurturing their infants and young children (via a political innovation such as parental leave) is, at least in some sense, revolutionary.

<sup>11</sup> This brief review of how the political parties in Sweden take a stance in the 'quota debate' is based on an examination of their webpages as of 16 August 2013. Information about the political parties' stances on these issues was gathered under headlines such as 'family politics', 'gender equality', 'parental leave' etc.

<sup>12</sup> In the original (Swedish): 'Alla pappor bör ta ut någon tid pappaledighet (utöver 10 dagar i samband med förlossningen). "Instämmer helt" motsvarar en 5:a och "instämmer inte alls" en 1:a.'

In existing research on men's experiences of parental leave in Sweden, often drawing upon qualitative interviews, men generally claim that they have been met by positive attitudes in their surroundings: from their partners, friends, and professionals working with parents and children. The following section will draw mainly upon the two largest and most ambitious studies on this theme; i.e., firstly, Chronholm's (2004) dissertation *Föräldraledig pappa* [Fathers on parental leave] from 2004, and, secondly, Klinth and Johansson's (2010) book *Nya svenska fäder* [New Swedish fathers]. In both studies, the researchers interviewed fathers who had taken a 'long' period of parental leave, that is, 6 months or more. In Chronholm's study, interviews are complemented by a questionnaire, while Klinth and Johansson's study also encompasses analyses of campaigns promoting men's parental leave.

Among other themes, Chronholm (2004) brings up fathers' social life during parental leave. While some men tend to isolate themselves (voluntarily or not), others report that they have had more contact with other children and parents. Although negative treatment is rare, fathers on parental leave tend to report that they do not fit in with some of the social spaces and activities dominated by mothers, such as playgrounds and open preschools<sup>13</sup>. Instead of referring to this phenomenon as discrimination or exclusion, Chronholm suggests that men's sense of not fitting in among mothers is related to men's unwillingness to participate in certain female-coded activities and topics of conversation, such as breastfeeding and childbirth (Chronholm 2004: 150–156, 170; see also: Axelsson, forthcoming; Klinth & Johansson 2010: 152). Another side of the same coin, however, is the positive special treatment that men on parental leave may experience. An illustrative example of this can be picked from my own study of interactions between fathers on parental leave. During an informal interview, one father mentioned that he went to the supermarket with his kids, whereupon an older woman complimented him for being a 'good dad' (Axelsson, forthcoming). Although it is definitely true that men can meet resistance and hostile attitudes when crossing gender borders, I would argue that this is generally not the case for those fathers in Sweden who seriously take on care responsibilities for their children. Rather, nurturing fatherhood is incorporated into contemporary ideals, discourses, ideologies, and political visions about men and masculinities in Sweden (Bekkengen 2002: 199–201; Ekenstam 2007: 183–187; Forsberg 2009; Hill, forthcoming; Hobson 2004: 100; Järvklo 2009; Klinth & Johansson 2010; Pringle 2012). Some researchers even claim that 'the caring father' has become one of the more high status/hegemonic positions in relation to other masculinities (Almqvist 2008; Almqvist, Sandberg & Dahlgren 2011; Johansson 2011).

It is important to add here, though, that Swedish gender research on fathers in general, and fathers on parental leave in particular, tends to focus on fathers who are white and Swedish born, heterosexual, highly educated, belong to the middle class, and live in urban settings. These men seem to be the ones who are most likely to embody the vision of gender-equal parenting and nurturing fatherhood. On the one hand, the focus on this specific group is explained by the take-

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<sup>13</sup> Open preschool is one of several features of general parenting support in Sweden. It can be described as a meeting place, provided by many (but not all) municipalities, in which parents on parental leave and their children can spend time and get to know others in similar life situations. Most often, preschool teachers are employed at open preschools, but others occupational groups, such as social workers, can also work there.

up of parental leave, in which a relatively high income and a good education are two of the most important factors (see more in the next section of this report). On the other hand, the stories and experiences of fathers who do not fit in as well with the national self-image of gender-equal parenting and nurturing fatherhood – e.g. immigrant fathers, gay fathers, single fathers, working-class fathers, and rural fathers – are not told or heard to the same extent. In recent years, this has however been acknowledged, discussed and – to some degree – addressed (Chronholm 2004: Chapter 9; Hill, forthcoming; Klinth & Johansson 2007; Plantin 2001).

### *Attitudes in work organizations*

As shown in the previous section, men's right to use parental leave is generally not questioned but rather supported. However, it is a common view that work organizations, through active or passive resistance, discourage or block men from sharing parental leave with women (Bekkengen 2002). If this is true, it is reasonable to draw the conclusion that negative attitudes to men's parental leave may prevent them from taking as much parental leave as they would like, and, conversely, that a more caring and family-oriented organizational culture would promote men's uptake of parental leave. How have Swedish organizational attitudes towards men's parental leave been described in previous research? How do men experience such attitudes? How do these attitudes affect men's use of parental leave?

Attitudes and policies in work organizations affect how employees (here specifically employees who are fathers) manage the relationship between paid work and other social commitments, such as caring for children and participating in household work. Just as policies on a national level may be 'father friendly' (or not), organizational cultures may promote and/or obstruct men's caring obligations alongside paid work. One can differentiate between three types of father friendliness in organizations: passive opposition, conditional support, and active support. National leave policies are generally supported among employers. Thus, active resistance towards men's use of forms of leave such as part-time work, temporary sick leave (for children), and parental leave is uncommon. More common is passive opposition, meaning that an organization accepts men's temporary leave-taking but disapproves of longer periods of leave. Moreover, such organizations have not implemented explicit policies aiming to promote men's leave-taking. Conditional support means that organizations acknowledge men's presence in the lives of their families and children. At least some policies for promoting fathers' leave-taking exist within the organization, and someone is responsible for such issues. Active support means that an organization has developed policies for men's use of parental leave and that it places an ideological and economic value on this (Haas & Hwang 1995; Haas, Allard & Hwang 2002; Russell & Hwang 2004).

One of the most successful ways of developing father-friendly organizational cultures, Haas and Hwang (2007) argue, is to promote an ethic of caring and to value the female workforce in terms of salaries and career opportunities. But also in male-dominated work organizations, one can develop more father-friendly and caring cultures by trying to bridge the gap between the public sphere of paid work and the familial sphere of unpaid work.

It has been shown that passive opposition is the most common type of organizational approach to fathers' leave-taking, followed by conditional support and then active support (Haas & Hwang 1995). One must, however, bear in mind that the studies stating this are based on surveys with large private companies conducted during the 1990s. Since then, men's use of parental leave has risen, which in turn may have normalized longer periods of leave from the workplace.

Concerning men's experiences of how organizational cultures support work-life balance, men rarely report high support. To the extent that they do, they seem to receive more support from their co-workers rather than their supervisors and managers (Allard, Haas & Hwang 2011). Similar results have been found in studies of how organizational culture influences men's uptake of parental leave. For example, Bygren and Duvander (2006) found that men working in organizations where fathers' uptake of parental leave is already low tend to reduce their own use of parental leave. They also found the opposite phenomenon: men tend to use more parental leave if their colleagues do. They also found, in accordance with previous studies carried out by Haas and colleagues, that men tend to shorten their leave if they work in an organization which may look unfavourably on men who take longer leaves than expected.

In another study, in which Haas, Allard and Hwang (2002) explored the relationship between organizational culture and men's use of paid parental leave, it was found that organizational attitudes to fathers' caring obligations influence men's use of parental leave. In particular, Haas and colleagues highlight that organizational cultures can be improved by incorporating caring values and father-friendly policies and by promoting the careers of female employees. Moreover, if fathers perceive support from their managers and if they work among colleagues who do not support a 'long-hours culture', they do not restrain themselves from taking parental leave in a manner that they otherwise might have done. While this study mainly explores how organizational culture affects men's uptake of parental leave, it also emphasizes that individual attitudes towards gender equality, shared parenting and childcare are of importance. This corresponds well with previous studies, which have stated that men's willingness to take parental leave is often a matter of personal choice (Bekkengen 2002; Chronholm 2004). One should also notice that the results in the literature on the relationship between organizational culture and men's uptake of parental leave may in some instances be flawed due to unwanted selection effects, meaning that 'fathers who want to use parental leave may be self-selected into certain workplaces' (Bygren & Duvander 2006: 370).

Finally, it should also be added to the picture that fathers' leave-taking does not have to be a case of conflict between employer and employee. There is a great deal of qualitative research in which men report positive encounters with their managers and colleagues (Chronholm 2004; Klinth & Johansson 2010; Nordberg 2005, 2007; Wissö 2012). In these specific studies, the participants are often explicitly prioritizing their caring obligations over their duties in working life. All in all, the question of how organizational culture affects men's uptake of parental leave is very complex. Indeed, organizational culture both encourages and constrains men's leave-taking. At the same time, most fathers receive support from policies and normative ideals concerning caring fatherhood, as they appear in national parenthood policies and in public norms



and discourse. These policies and norms are very helpful for those fathers who – regardless of the attitude in their workplaces – choose to take longer periods of leave than expected.

#### 4. Fathers' use of parental leave

There are several previous in-depth analyses and a great deal of statistics relating to men's use of parental leave in Sweden (Duvander 2014; ISF 2013a, 2013b; Swedish Social Insurance Agency 2011, 2013b). I will therefore not do a full review of the literature on this matter. Instead, I will concentrate the presentation on three issues: the length of parental leave; occupational differences; and whether or not fathers are the main carers of their children during parental leave.

##### *Length of leave*

Since the introduction of parental leave insurance in 1974, men's use of benefit days has risen considerably, as illustrated in the following table.

Table 3: Days for which parental allowance paid 1974–2011

<i>Percentage (%) by women and men</i>		
Year	Women	Men
1974	99.5	0.5
1980	95	5
1985	94	6
1990	93	7
1995	90	10
2000	88	12
2005	80	20
2010	76.9	23.1
2011	76.3	23.7
2012	75.6	24.4

Source: Statistics Sweden (2012: 43) (concerning the rounded numbers 1980–2005); Swedish Social Insurance Agency (2013b: 10) (concerning the more detailed numbers in 1974 and 2010–2012).

It is important to bear in mind that the numbers given in the table illustrate parental leave days for which allowance has been *paid* (up to when children turn eight). Due to the flexibility of the Swedish parental leave system, it is possible for a parent to prolong her/his length of parental leave by applying for fewer benefit days than she/he is actually on leave. Thus, parental leave becomes partially *unpaid*, which is rarely visible in the statistics. Combining paid benefit days with unpaid days is very common and has recently led to a debate about whether the contemporary design of the insurance may be too flexible (Duvander 2013; ISF 2013b; Karimi et al. 2012; Vikman 2013).

Due to this flexibility, it is difficult to measure exactly how long fathers' (and thus mothers') leave is. But it has definitely become longer and longer for the vast majority of men. Of particular importance here are the two 'quota reforms' in which, in the first stage, 30 days were reserved for each parent (in 1995), and, in the second stage, another 30 days were reserved (in 2002). Both reforms increased men's share of paid parental leave, and, at the same time, women's use was decreased (Karimi et al. 2012). Recent research has shown, however, that mothers' actual time spent at home has not decreased as much as the statistics on paid leave imply, due to women's use of the flexibility available in parental leave insurance (ISF 2013b).

Although it is hard to estimate the length of fathers' parental leave, the general patterns are well known. In a report by Duvander on behalf of The Swedish Social Insurance Inspectorate (ISF 2013b), a difference is made between studies based on surveys and those based on register data. According to two surveys carried out in 2003 and 2009, in which women and men were asked to estimate their total amount of parental leave, the average length was: 1.7 months for men, and 14.3 months for women (in the 2003 survey where parents of children born in 1999 participated) (ISF 2013b: 23-24); and 3.3 months for men, and 14.1 months for women (in the 2009 survey based on information from different cohorts of parents of children born in the mid 1990s and thereafter) (ISF 2013b: 23-24).

Due to different methodological aspects, results from surveys like those referred to above are likely to differ considerably. Nonetheless, they contribute to the most common way of measuring the uptake of parental leave. Instead of compiling *benefit days*, such studies estimate the total *length* of parental leave. Despite methodological differences and obstacles, such surveys clearly illustrate that parental leave is still strongly divided by gender, although the length of Swedish fathers' parental leave is extensive in an international context.

It is, perhaps not surprisingly, common for men to take parental leave later than women. In studies based on register data, this is obvious. As an example, 44.7 % of fathers used paid parental leave during the first year of the child's life (concerning children born in 2007). In contrast: 72.1 % of fathers (in this case of children born in 2006) went on parental leave within the child's first two years of life (Duvander and Lammi-Taskula 2011: 48-49).

The vast majority of all fathers take some parental leave. In a study of the uptake of parental leave among parents of children born in 2004, it was shown that only 18.2 % of the fathers did not use a single day of paid parental leave during the child's first four years of life (Swedish Social Insurance Agency 2011: 35-36). 88.3 % of all fathers (of children born in 2004) used some parental leave before their child turned eight. Among these fathers, it was most common to start taking parental leave after their child's first birthday: at around 13 to 15 months of age. In terms of the total amount of parental leave days, fathers (of children born in 2003) used on average 91 days before their child's eighth birthday while mothers took 342 days (Duvander & Haas 2013: 271).

Improved methods for measuring the length of men's and women's parental leave were developed in the above-mentioned study by Duvander and The Swedish Social Inspectorate (ISF 2013b). This study, which distinguishes between paid and unpaid parental leave, shows that

parents (especially women) take considerably longer leaves than the statistics on reimbursed days show. On the one hand, this knowledge is not new. But on the other hand, the methodological approach used – by measuring *episodes* of parental leave – indicate more convincingly that ‘... women’s parental leave has not shortened in step with men’s prolonged parental leave and that the take-up patterns for women and men can be very different’ (ISF 2013b: 67<sup>14</sup>).

### *Occupational differences*

Several intersecting social categories and power asymmetries are important when exploring men’s use of parental leave. These are, for example, age, land of origin, degree of establishment on the labour market, class (here including education, income and occupation), and the backgrounds of the partner. Since I am focusing on occupational differences here, I shall just mention very briefly that low or no uptake of parental leave is more common among: younger fathers (below the age of 30); fathers from certain countries or continents (for example sub-Saharan countries); poorly educated fathers (with only the nine years of compulsory school); fathers who are low-income earners; unemployed fathers; fathers with weak positions in the labour market; and fathers who live together with a female partner with low education (Swedish Social Insurance Agency 2011).

When it comes to how occupational differences among fathers relate to their parental leave uptake, existing data shows that extensive use of parental leave correlates with working within the public sector. Most likely, this has to do with more permissive attitudes and organizational adjustments to work-family balance within the public sector. This may in turn be related to the public sector’s female-dominated workforce (and thus experiences of handling longer periods of leave and part-time work), its closer relation to the state (and thus a greater involvement in and acceptance of gender equality and parenthood policies), its non-profit character (which means that an employee does not have to worry as much about the company’s productivity losses due to his absence from work), and its (generally) high numbers of employees in each work organization and workplace (ISF 2013b: 27). Also, there is a domino effect in fathers’ use of leave, in that fathers seem to be affected by how other fathers use parental leave. If one work organization has a high rate of uptake, other fathers may follow the example of their colleagues, which seems to benefit fathers working in the public sector (Bygren & Duvander 2006).

As Haas and colleagues have pointed out (see the section on attitudes in work organizations above), long-hour cultures, the public-private split, and other forms of ‘father unfriendliness’ are more common within the private sector than the public. Although active opposition to men’s use of parental leave is rare, policies that actively support men’s childcare obligations are often missing. This may leave men in an ambiguous intermediate position between two social institutions: the family and the workplace. Although this has been the case for several decades for women, it is a somewhat newer phenomenon for men. In this situation, men may feel (in

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<sup>14</sup> In the original (Swedish): ‘... kvinnors föräldraledighet inte har förkortats i takt med att mäns har förlängts och att mönstret för uttag för kvinnor och män kan vara mycket olika.’

some cases an unwarranted) fear of 'punishment' from their employer. This latter argument is highlighted by Bekkengen (2002), who, based on an interview study with parents, work colleagues and employers, questions the discourse about workplace attitudes as an obstacle to men's parental leave. In her interviews, arguments like 'if it was not for the employer' were often put forward by the interviewees, although without giving concrete examples of negative treatment or attitudes among employers (2002: 179-180). This is not to say, however, that men do not face workplace-related difficulties when taking on care responsibilities. Rather, it reminds us that paid work and career, especially within the private sector, are deeply embedded in how men in general perceive themselves as working and gendered beings. Therefore, it might be misleading to put too much emphasis on how *work organizations*, although they definitely differ between the public and private sectors, enable and/or restrain men from engaging more fully in childcare. Also, one has to take into account how fatherhood, fathers, and fathering are gendered, powered, institutionalized, and structured in a broader sense (Hearn 2002; Morgan 2011).

*Are fathers the main carers of children during parental leave?*

Contemporary Swedish parental leave generally represents a 'one carer at a time' model. With the exception of 30 'double days', for which parental leave benefit is disbursed to both parents at the same time, only one parent at a time can receive the benefit. In theory, this would mean that fathers' (and mothers') uptake of paid parental leave days equate with being the main carer. In practice, this simplified connection is neither true nor false, due to: the flexible character of parental leave insurance; the many ways of combining paid leave with unpaid leave; and parents shifting their life-work conditions and having different motives for using paid parental leave (Bekkengen 2002: 189–190; ISF 2013b; Swedish Social Insurance Agency 2013a: 22).

One of the most reliable sources of data concerning the degree to which Swedish fathers are the main carers during parental leave is Duvander's study on parental leave episodes (ISF 2013b). In this study, it is reported that men have more parental leave episodes than women. Duvander summarizes and discusses this as follows:

That men use so many episodes indicates that they to a lesser extent take a long break from paid work for engaging entirely in childcare, or that they complement a somewhat longer leave with many shorter episodes. It is probably easier to maintain balance and contact with working life if parental leave is used in this manner. That men use more episodes also shows that it is easy to misjudge men's uptake of parental leave if only days for which benefits have been dispersed are measured. Being on leave one day a week or prolonging a vacation is not the same thing as taking full responsibility for a child during a longer period of time. *It is thus possible that the woman in many cases retains the main responsibility for children and the household during the man's (short) parental leave.* (ISF 2013b: 69, my translation, italics added<sup>15</sup>)

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<sup>15</sup> In the original (Swedish): 'Att män tar så många episoder tyder på att de i mindre utsträckning gör ett långt avbrott från för- värvsarbetet för att enbart ägna sig åt att vårda barn, eller att de kompletterar en något längre ledighet med många korta episoder. Det är troligt att det är lättare att upprätthålla balansen och hålla kontakten med arbetslivet om föräldraledigheten tas ut på detta sätt. Att män tar fler episoder visar också att det är lätt att felbedöma mäns uttag av föräldraledighet om bara föräldrapenningdagarna mäts. Att vara ledig en dag i veckan eller att förlänga semestern är inte samma sak som att ta helhetsansvar för barnet under en längre tid. Det är därmed möjligt

Although Duvander's study does not measure how common it is for men to be the main carers during parental leave (or, for that matter, how common it is for both parents to stay at home with a child at the same time), its conclusions are well grounded. Its results correspond with previous research which has shown that men's leave appears to be part of a general 'family leave' rather than individual leave, and that men, as fathers, even in a relatively gender-equal society such as Sweden, tend to position themselves as 'second parents' rather than main carers (Bekkengen 2002; Elvin-Nowak 2005).

In the above-mentioned interview studies with fathers who have taken longer leaves, it appears that being the main carer can be natural, self-evident and relatively unproblematic (Chronholm 2004; Klinth & Johansson 2010). This was also reported in the interviews that I conducted for my dissertation on fathers' relationships with other fathers during parental leave (Axelsson, forthcoming). This does not, however, say anything about the extent to which fathers are the main carers during parental leave. However, it clearly illustrates that being the main carer is a desirable and, in many cases, a high-status masculine position for fathers to claim – in discourse and/or in practice (Johansson 2011).

## **5. The gendered division of parental leave**

The skewed distribution of parental leave between women and men has been explained in different ways. Firstly, I will go through some popular explanations with a somewhat weaker connection to gender and feminist research. Secondly, and even more importantly, I will present different explanations explicitly based on gender and feminist research.

In the first category I would like to place *rational choice* theories together with *essentialist*, *functionalist*, and *pop-psychologist* analyses, claiming that women's 'natural' and/or social roles (and/or rational choices) make them better fitted for caring for small children, and, following from this, that children may suffer from being nurtured by their fathers. This type of argument is generally ill-suited to explain social change. Not only do they harm or place blame on women; they also ignore historical transformations, political interventions, and social power relations, and reduce both women and men to predestined creatures without agency.

These popular ideas, although they are rarely heard today, still mould contemporary thinking among lay people, in politics, and – in some cases – in research. This is especially true of what Bekkengen (2002: 18) calls the argument about '*traditional sex roles*', which lies behind a number of parental leave campaigns by state authorities aiming to release parents and families from the sex roles they have become caught up in. As well as the 'traditional sex role' argument above, Bekkengen also discusses three others. The first is *economic* in its nature: if men, due to their higher income, take too much parental leave, the family will suffer economically. Although it is true that men's incomes clearly have an impact on how both men and women choose to use paid parental leave (Swedish Social Insurance Agency 2011), economic decisions are also gendered and cannot be understood separately from other negotiations and family practices

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att kvinnan i flera fall behåller huvudansvaret för både barn och hus- håll även under mannens (korta) föräldraledighet.'

taking place between parents (Bekkengen 2002: 20). As Duvander (2014: 14) states, based upon a study of how women's and men's attitudes to family, work, economics, and gender equality affect the length of parental leave: 'as the economic reasons for leave length seem more important for men, it is necessary to determine whether this has to do with more substantial economic consequences long term for men than for women or whether the result has to do with *men emphasizing the economic consequences* more, perhaps as part of their provider role.' Bekkengen's second argument has already been discussed in detail in the previous section, namely *attitudes within work organizations*; therefore I do not develop that argument further in this discussion. Her third argument relates to the debate on '*maternal gatekeeping*', according to which mothers limit fathers' participation in childcare (see e.g. Allen & Hawkins 1999). Since gender is perceived, performed and powered in multiple and sometimes contradictory ways, it is of course possible for women to obstruct men from caring for (or, for that matter, from hurting) their children. But, as Bekkengen (2002: 22) states, although 'quantitative studies show [...] that the woman's socio-economic position correlates with the man's uptake of parental leave', one should be careful about drawing the conclusion that mothers hinder men from taking parental leave. In the light of the extensive feminist research on love and sexuality inequalities in heterosexual coupledom and parenthood during the last several decades, this explanation is not particularly convincing (Gunnarsson 2013; Holmberg 1993).

In the second category – among the more detailed and explicitly feminist analyses – explanations take historical, political, cultural, and social matters into account. Here, one can mention *historical and contemporary comparative analyses of parenthood policies* (and their effects) in a broader sense (see e.g. Gíslason & Björk Eydal 2011; Leira 2006). Such studies often combine policy analysis with quantitative methods and theoretical elaborations in that they describe and analyze the development of parenthood policies and men's parental leave uptake as an example of how parenthood policies actually work; such policies have a transformative effect on people's lives at the same time as they are operating within robust gendered structures and upon individuals with different interests. Moreover, *how fatherhood is represented* in the media and campaign material also gives a hint as to why parental leave is still unequally distributed between men and women: 'new' and 'caring' fathers are generally portrayed as 'good enough' as long as they engage more than previous generations of fathers, or if they take the ear-marked part of the parental leave (Hill, forthcoming; Klinth & Johansson 2010). Men's and women's achievements as parents or thus not valued and judged on the same terms. Another form of explanation is to use *quantitative methods to study how parental leave uptake correlates with the societal organization of childcare, organizational culture, socio-economic, and demographic characteristics*. Many parts of this report are based on such research (such as the sections on attitudes and leave patterns, above). Yet another reason is highlighted by Larsson (2012: 21) who, in his study of part-time work among fathers, stresses the connection between *consumption norms* and fathers' reluctance to engage in part-time work. This argument is also probably relevant to the uneven distribution of parental leave between women and men: if families are not willing to reduce their (over-)consumption, they will be less likely to share parental leave more

equally. Finally, I would like to stress the importance of understanding the unequal sharing of parental leave between mothers and fathers in terms of *institutional and structural inequalities between women and men*. Such approaches are still underdeveloped, although Bekkengen's (2002, 2006) publications may serve as exceptions. Such approaches are more theoretically informed and give more detailed explanations of how women's and men's positions as *parents* and as *gendered beings* are separated *and* intertwined (Axelsson, forthcoming).

## **6. Development of men's careers**

The research on how men's careers develop after parental leave is rather limited, both in Sweden and internationally. There is a substantial lack of longitudinal studies, which, if they existed, would be able to provide reliable empirical evidence on how men's use of parental leave is linked to the development of male careers in terms of, for example, earnings, working hours, retention and promotion. However, this does not mean that this topic is a blank spot on the research map. Here, I have chosen to divide studies related to this question into three areas of research: studies of men's experiences of parental leave; an analysis of the rhetoric in campaigns aiming to increase fathers' share of parental leave; the labour market and organizational research aiming to explore how carrier interruptions caused by parental leave insurance affect men's (and women's) careers.

### *Careers among men who have taken a long parental leave*

Interview studies with men who have taken longer periods of leave illustrate different aspects of the conflict between career development and parental leave. Some men report that there is indeed a conflict between being, on the one hand, a successful employee, and, on the other hand, a caretaking father. While some of these men are ambivalent, stressed and troubled by the (for women already familiar) 'trap' between working life and family life (Ekenstam 2007), others declare that they have easily been able to prioritize their children over their career (Klinth & Johansson 2010: 139).

Men's development towards increased family and child orientation has been studied and discussed intensively in Swedish gender and family research (Bekkengen 2002). In Klinth and Johansson's study, this tendency is related to the development of a 'rising Nordic middle-class masculinity' (2010: 155, my translation). Men who represent this position seem to be relatively well-paid and work in flexible organizations. Further, Klinth and Johansson report that men who take a long period of leave tend to view their use of parental leave as something 'non-negotiable' and 'natural'. From this point of view, men's parental leave stands for a 'modernity critique'. On the one hand, this critique questions the high demands of an intense working life; on the other hand, it celebrates the 'rational and emotional capital' that may be adopted during parental leave – new competences which may be useful in men's careers after their leave (2010: 158–159, my translations).

Similar findings and interpretations have been made by Chronholm (2004) and Nordberg (2005, 2007). In Chronholm's (2004: 128–129) study, three 'successful' stories are told, in

which men negotiated their right to parental leave at the very beginning during job interviews. Although it is impossible to make (statistically significant) generalizations from such a small number of episodes, they can be interpreted as a sign of the strong ideological support for men's parental leave and caring fatherhood in Sweden. In Nordberg's (2005, 2007) works on men taking parental leave, men's ambiguous thoughts about family life and working life are once again highlighted. Generally, men seem to find it hard to liberate themselves from the ideal image of men as breadwinners with high career ambitions. Despite this, or perhaps thanks to it, they embrace the opportunities given to them through Swedish gender-equality policies and the gender-neutral parental leave insurance, which opens up different ways for men to position and identify themselves as men. An important argument, put forward by Nordberg, is that 'men's longing for another life' – a life in which they can more easily move between the positions of 'father' and 'worker' – has to be taken seriously (2005: 122, my translations).

The reviewed studies reveal a great desire among fathers to overcome the gap between their obligations in family and working life. Although this research has its limitations, not least because it generally draws upon interviews with a relatively homogeneous and privileged group of male individuals, it still contributes to our understanding of how fathers perceive themselves, their relationships with their children and (female) partners, and contemporary working life. It highlights men's wishes and longings for emotionally and relationally rich lives in a socio-political contemporary context characterized by several competing masculine ideals, such as being the 'main economic provider', 'successful employees', a 'child-oriented carer', and a 'gender-equal carer'. The normative pressure to embody all (or at least several) of these positions seem to be strong among men, and particularly so among socio-economically and ethnically privileged men, who show a considerable awareness of the competing normative ideals related to men and fathers.

#### *Careers in parental leave campaigns*

This section builds mainly on Klinth and Johansson's (2010) study of such campaigns as they appeared between 1976 and 2006. The majority of the campaign materials were produced by the Swedish Social Insurance Agency, which on behalf of the government is committed to informing citizens about parental leave insurance. However, other stakeholders – e.g. labour unions and other authorities at the state, regional or local level – also contributed to the production of campaign material. Although the main part of the campaigns does not explicitly address the question of paternity leave and careers, some of it actually does. By looking into how men's relations to childcare and career are represented in these campaigns – in posters, reports, magazines, information letters, and websites – prevailing discourses on fatherhood in Swedish society are revealed.

The early campaigns tried to combine archaic or hyper-masculine ideals with more modern and child-oriented ones, thus bridging the gap between being a man and being a caregiver. Just like the first campaigns, the material addressing the relation between men's paternity leave and their career development illustrates a conflict: (how) can care and career go hand-in-hand? The



campaigns try to come up with a possible solution, by portraying men's parental leave as a skill or experience, which may be beneficial for fathers' inner development, their careers, and for work organizations as a whole. A striking example of this is the following informative message, conveyed by the Swedish Social Insurance Agency on their website in 1999 under the headline 'Why paternity leave?':

You gain the ability to handle and solve unexpected problems, which is beneficial for you on other occasions. At home with the children, other social norms prevail compared with e.g. the workplace. In this way you will become more able to 'handle people' after paternity leave, which is something that many dads have verified. (Klinth & Johansson 2010: 93–94<sup>16</sup>)

When men's parental leave is promoted and described in terms of 'education rather than care', children tend to 'be placed in men's personal and professional life projects' (2010: 94, my translation). In this way, parental leave and children become something consumable – a social worth in which men may invest to get the best out of two worlds: 'satisfaction, good social relations, personal development [and] success in their professional career' (2010: 95, my translation).

Before drawing any conclusions, it is important to note that the gendered representations of fatherhood in these campaigns shifted over the years. Initially, between 1976 and 2001, fathers were portrayed as stand-in parents, fully capable of caring for their children although not fully responsible. Later, between 2002 and 2006, children's needs and women's and men's full and equal responsibility as parents were proclaimed, and thus fathers' roles as stand-in parents were almost abandoned (2010: 107–111). Indeed, at the beginning the Swedish paternity leave campaigns were 'masculinizing care', but over the decades (although not in a linear way) they have also been part of a larger development of 'revisiting [...] masculinity' (Dowd 2010: 113–114). Their message has been quite straightforward: paternity leave is possible, desirable and even beneficial for both fathers and employers.

#### *Labour market and organizational research on fathers' careers*

Generally speaking, having children does not mean the same thing for women and men in terms of their subsequent careers (including the development of earnings, and the possibilities of being promoted). Several reasons could be mentioned here; however, I will focus on how parental leave affects fathers' (and to some extent mothers') careers. Indeed, the (un)equal distribution of parental leave has effects on parents' future careers: 'Even if the employment is well protected, and discrimination laws for parents are strong in Sweden, it is shown that a long leave is detrimental for career and income development' (Duvander 2014: 5). In short, women's longer parental leave affects their incomes negatively, although women are not directly 'punished' for

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<sup>16</sup> In the original (Swedish): 'Du skaffar dig en förmåga att tackla och lösa oväntade problem, som du får stor nytta av i andra sammanhang. Hemma med barnen gäller andra umgängesregler än t ex på jobbet. Därför blir du skickligare på att "ta folk" efter en pappaledighet, något som många pappor vittnat om.'

taking parental leave (Albrecht et al. 1999; Angelov, Johansson & Lindahl 2013). How women's careers are affected by their use of parental leave is not particularly disputed in research, but when it comes to how men's parental leave affects their careers, the picture is more multifaceted and, sometimes, contradictory.

A study by Kennerberg (2007) investigates how women's and men's work situation changes after having children. It shows that men's *earnings* are to a lesser degree (if at all) affected by parental leave uptake when compared with women's earnings. Kennerberg also reports that fathers' *working hours* often remain unchanged or increase after having children, which is not the case for mothers. However, there is some evidence that fathers' (longer) leave taking has positive effects on their partners' subsequent earnings, while women's use of parental leave does not seem to affect men's earnings (Johansson 2010). Another relevant study (Karimi et al. 2012), evaluates the 'quota' reforms of 1995 and 2002, and finds that fathers' *labour supply* remained unaffected by the reforms.

If the studies referred to above indicate that parental leave uptake does not affect fathers, at least not negatively, other studies have come to different conclusions. Albrecht et al. (1999) investigate the relationship between the use of parental leave (and other career interruptions) and subsequent wages. In an analysis drawing upon Swedish data, Albrecht and colleagues report that the men who participated in the study experienced 'a significant *wage loss* as a result of taking parental leave (almost 10 percent per year)' (1999: 303, italics added). This is explained by the fact that employers evaluate mothers and fathers differently. While mothers' leaves are expected (and thus do not signal a lower commitment to work), fathers' (longer periods of) leave are not expected (and thus do signal a lower commitment to work). Similar results are reported, for example, by Johansson (2010), who finds that men's increased use of parental leave has strong (but short term) negative effects on their *earnings*.

Although this report focuses on Sweden, I would like to expand the already elusive picture of impacts on male careers by summarizing three Norwegian studies on this topic. Firstly, in a study that mainly investigates the causal effects of men's parental leave on children's school performance and outcomes with regard to the labour market and the family, Cools, Fiva and Johannessen Kirkebøen (2011) report that they can neither dismiss nor verify the hypothesis that fathers' *working hours* or *earnings* are affected by men's parental leave uptake.

Secondly, in a study based upon registry data, Rege and Solli (2010) show that men's uptake of parental leave affects future *earnings*. Four weeks of parental leave decreases future earnings by two per cent, they claim. Their analysis is, however, limited by the fact that they could not follow the development for longer than five years after a child's birth.

Thirdly, a somewhat different methodological approach, which fruitfully contributes to the already-mentioned studies, is taken by Bjørnholt (2010), who combines a longitudinal and a qualitative perspective. In a follow-up study with 14 heterosexual couples/parents who started to work part-time during the 1970s, Bjørnholt reports that fathers did not suffer from any kind of punishment on the labour market due to their part-time work. Rather, their involvement in family life was advantageous for them, since employers generally saw this as a *merit* and a *competence*

in leadership (which is similar to how men's parental leave is construed in parental leave campaigns, as mentioned previously). Women who had worked part-time did not experience the same thing. It has to be said, however, that the men in the study were rather privileged in terms of class, and that those who became managers stopped working part time. Moreover, Bjørnholt stresses that one has to be careful not to make generalizations from her study of these, as she phrases it, 'rather special men' (2010: 587). She also points out that most of the men are/were working in the public sector, which to some extent might have had a positive effect on the attitudes of employers (see the section on occupational differences in men's leave uptake). Nonetheless, Bjørnholt's study is original and important, in that it actually draws upon longitudinal (although not quantitative) data. Although it is limited in scope and, moreover, concerns part-time work rather than episodes of full parental leave in which fathers are absent from work, it demonstrates that it is very misleading to assume that men's family responsibilities equate to lesser career opportunities. Even more importantly, her study reveals the gendered, classed, and powered natures of parenthood. To put it straightforwardly: As long as fathers have the 'right' class background and are doing gender 'right', they *may*, in an inequitable manner compared to mothers, improve their careers by declaring a greater interest in the lives of their families and children.

To conclude, much still needs to be done to gather empirical evidence about how men's careers develop after parental leave. The findings of recent studies, as shown here, are different and contradictory. Although one definitely can, and should, develop more sophisticated quantitative methods and longitudinal data sets for investigating how men's careers are affected by their use of parental leave, there is still a need for a variety of *methodological* and feminist *theoretical* analyses. This is because the causal effects searched for in quantitative studies will not be able to take into account those *privileges*, or, for that matter, those *mistreatments*, that men experience on a more concrete and observable level of social organization on the 'floor' or in the 'office' (Martin 2001, 2003).

## **7. Fathers re-entering the labour market**

Starting with legislation, parents' right to re-enter the labour market after a period of parental leave is regulated in the Parental Leave Act, and this is described very shortly. The law states that an employee can call off his/her on-going leave with relatively short notice and thus start working again. The employer may postpone the employee's return to work by up to a month (SFS 1995:584, §15) but this is not the common scenario, since the Parental Leave Act also states that employees shall announce planned parental leave to the employer at the latest two months before the leave starts. When announcing leave, the employee is also expected to inform the employer when he/she will return to work (§13).

How fathers' re-entrance into the workplace is organized and experienced practically has not been part of mainstream research on parental leave. What is known, however, is that fathers, to a higher degree than mothers, take more and shorter episodes of leave, which signals their availability in the workplace (ISF 2013b). Contact between employer and employee during leave

seems to be most common, and most problematic, within flexible and knowledge-intensive organizations, which may require (too) much availability among their employees. In a Norwegian interview study, fathers working in such organizations reported a 'limitless' period of leave, during which the employer demanded work tasks from the employee fathers (Brandth & Kvande 2003: 193–196). It is likely that those who have had such leave periods do not experience a sharp line between paid work and parental leave. When returning to work, in contrast to those fathers who make more distinct dividing lines between leave and work, they can probably get back to their regular tasks more easily.

The most common way for employers to deal with fathers' absence from work seems to be to redistribute their work tasks between colleagues (Bekkengen 2002: 85). This creates (unwanted) changes in the workplace and fathers on leave may thus face negative reactions from colleagues, partly due to men's rather short leaves. If men's leaves were longer, like women's, it would in some cases be easier and more relevant for the employer to hire a fill-in worker. Although men's parental leave may cause problems for the employer, men who re-enter the workplace are generally appreciated according to Bekkengen's interview study with parents, colleagues, and employers. She writes: 'In the interviewees' talk, one can distinguish that men and women on parental leave are regarded in different ways [...] *the woman* becomes "dull-minded", gets "gruel in the brain" and becomes "rusty", while *the man* returns with "hunger for knowledge" that "increases effectiveness"' (2002: 86–87<sup>17</sup>).

To sum up, information regarding how employers organize men's return to work after parental leave is sparse. The studies referred to above indicate, however, that the discourses around men's parental leave should facilitate their return to work. Unfortunately, how men who have taken a long period of leave view their return to the workplace is largely missing from the existing interview studies performed by Chronholm (2004) and Klinth and Johansson (2010). In the literature regarding how men's careers develop (see Section 6, above), this matter is not dealt with, at least not to my knowledge, since the research is concerned with estimating the effects of parental leave on earnings and participation in household work rather than the concrete organization of tasks in the workplace. One possible interpretation of why this specific theme is under-studied is that the focus among stakeholders and researchers has been to promote and/or to study the mechanisms behind and the patterns of father's *leave taking* (including work organizations' roles in this process). Evidently, researchers have been far more interested in how and why fathers get *away* from work than what happens when they *return* to work.

## **8. Conclusions and future challenges**

This report, which is a literature review, has aimed to give an account of three themes – *policies*, *attitudes* and *practices* – related to parental leave for fathers in contemporary Sweden. In this conclusion, I will briefly summarize the results of the report, and, in connection to each theme,

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<sup>17</sup> In the original (Swedish): 'I de intervjuades berättelser går det att urskilja att föräldralediga män och kvinnor betraktas på skilda sätt [...] *kvinnan* blir "fördummad", får "välling i hjärnan" och blir "ringrostig", medan *mannen* återkommer med "kunskapshunger" som "ökar effektiviteten".'

discuss future challenges associated with men's parental leave and equality, although with a focus on *gender* equality.

Firstly, regarding *policies*, I have shown that Sweden has one of the most generous parental leave insurance packages in the world, and that its gender-neutral status, including earmarked days for each parent, is generally supported in politics.

Parental leave insurance will most probably continue to be a subject for political debate. Since it has changed substantially during its 40 years of existence, it is hard to imagine that it will remain unchanged over the coming years and decades. Its flexible character has been questioned and it is very likely that some restraints upon the flexible use will be adopted. Moreover, parental leave insurance is expensive and, depending on how the economic situation develops, the allowance levels may be cut (as they were during the 1990s). I do not consider it likely that the levels of economic compensation will be increased. Another important matter for Swedish stakeholders is how leave schemes for parents at the EU level and in other European countries will continue to develop. Since Nordic parenthood politics have been influential in Europe, it is important to study and learn from how leave schemes are motivated, construed, and met in other countries.

The big controversial question in parental leave policy-making, though, concerns quotas. Do any political parties or governments dare to further intervene in how parents share parental leave? Although one can question how effective quotas are in promoting gender equality (Bjørnholt 2012), it is, indeed, the most effective way of changing uptake patterns. As Brandth and Kvande state: 'Optional leave does not have the transformative power that is necessary to increase fathers' share of childcare' (2013: 26<sup>18</sup>). Earmarked days in parental leave insurance have, at least in Sweden, influenced general opinions of what 'good enough' fathering is. Although mothers and fathers are still perceived and judged differently and unequally in their social surroundings, I would like to stress that quotas have been, and still are, essential if we want to make childcare into a more universal and, thus, less gender-differentiated human capacity.

Secondly, concerning *attitudes* to fathers on parental leave, men's leave-taking is promoted and supported in policies and among lay people, as shown in surveys and interview studies. Moreover, fathers are expected to take parental leave, and almost all men do so. Men who have taken longer leaves than expected have in general reported positive experiences of both the leave itself and the responses from their social networks. An exception is that negative reactions may come from employers and colleagues, although positive attitudes are also reported. Organizational cultures do have an impact on men's uptake of parental leave.

Although positive attitudes to fathers' leave-taking and involvement in childcare prevail, one can note that the expectations of women and men, as parents, are not equivalent. Among lay people, parenting professionals, employers and colleagues, and, not least, among parents

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<sup>18</sup> In the original (Norwegian): 'Valgbar permisjon har ikke den forandringskraften som skal til for å øke fars tid til barneomsorg.'

themselves, much work is still to be done if women and men are to experience the same conditions as parents.

The blame directed at mothers for not being good enough, and the 'pedestals' upon which involved fathers are placed, are clearly obstructing gender-equal parenting. Here there is much to be learned from parenting beyond heterosexual coupledness. When single women and same-sex couples have children, parenting becomes less gendered. By highlighting the experiences of 'non-normative' parents – through progressive legislation, public debate, and more research on this topic – other stories of how parenting is done can be told (Johansson 2014). I believe that this is also beneficial for gender equality in 'traditional' heterosexual coupledness and parenting, since non-normative parenting has a greater potential for 'decoding' the role of gender in parenting and puts the child's need for care at the centre of parenting practices.

Thirdly, moving on to *practices*, the *uptake* of parental leave varies between men. Although most men take parental leave at some stage, some actually take no leave at all, and longer leaves during the child's first year of life are rare. Fathers' shorter and more frequent leave episodes indicate that they are not main carers to the same extent as women. Why women and men still *share* parental leave unevenly and unequally has been explained by, for example, rational choice theory, essentialist and functionalist thought. Traditional sex roles, economic reasons, non-father-friendly organizational cultures, and maternal gatekeeping have also been put forward as possible explanations. Some of these explanations have a weak connection to gender research and feminist theory; therefore, other explanations have been developed in the fields of: historical and comparative policy research; discursive analysis of fatherhood representations; quantitative analysis of how leave-taking corresponds with the societal organization of childcare, organizational culture, socio-economic, and demographic characteristics; and, finally, more theoretically informed analyses of how leave-taking intersects with institutional and structural gendered inequalities.

Related to men's uptake of leave and the skewed sharing of parental leave is the relation between gendered norms and structures on the one hand, and social exclusion on the other. As leave-taking differs considerably among men, greater efforts have to be made to understand how gender relates to socio-economic status, 'Swedishness' and ethnic variations. Existing qualitative research gives the impression that Sweden is a rather homogeneous society. The practices, experiences, and voices of working-class fathers, upper-class fathers, and fathers from ethnic minorities are to a large extent missing.

Yet another important matter when discussing parental leave uptake and sharing is part-time work. While fathers' full-time (but short-term) parental leave has been heavily supported in Sweden, fathers' part-time work is usually neglected (Larsson 2012). Among Swedish mothers, part-time work is very common, but it is extremely rare among fathers. These patterns are well known, but the focus on full-time parental leave still prevails in politics. A new politics of time is definitely needed, in which promoting gender-equal parenting also includes promoting fathers' part-time work. This might even be more important than promoting full-time parental leave.

How leave-taking is connected to men's *careers* is yet another topic in the report. The findings vary considerably and are sometimes contradictory: Qualitative interviews with fathers (who have taken a longer leave than expected) and analyses of how men's parental leave and careers are portrayed in campaign material generally report that men's care obligations and career ambitions can go hand in hand and that men can experience positive career effects due to long leave-taking. Quantitative studies, on the other hand, have generally found that fathers' careers are less affected by leave-taking than mothers'. While some studies find that fathers are unaffected by leave-taking, others find that they are 'punished' for it.

Although the empirical evidence for how men's parental leave affects their careers seems to be sparse, leave-taking does definitely have different symbolic and practical implications for working mothers and fathers in the eyes of work organizations. Moreover, the biased understandings of a) women's (longer) leave-taking as *normal*, and b) men's (shorter) leave-taking as a signal of *low commitment*, or, for that matter, as a capacity that may *boost* men's careers, have to be broken down. Perhaps the most important things an employer could do to change gendered understandings of parents' leave-taking, here drawing upon the work of Haas and colleagues, is to actively support women at all stages in their careers, since that affects organizational cultures and signals that family responsibilities – in practice – are possible to combine with careers. It is not, in my view, obvious that focusing on fathers' needs and father-friendly organizational cultures are the most effective interventions. If women's conditions are changed, men will have to adjust their life courses, including how they care for their children and how they may advance in their careers.

Finally, how fathers *re-enter* the workplace after parental leave has been discussed. In contrast to the other issues, information on this matter is rather scarce. It is, however, likely that men working in flexible organizations do not experience sharp divisions between being away from work and re-entering work. This is also implied in statistics showing that fathers have shorter and more frequent leave episodes, which probably indicate that fathers often remain in contact with their employer during parental leave. Due to the lack of research on this topic, I have to restrict the discussion to one single argument: Future research on men's parental leave-taking must show an interest in the practices and processes involved when men return to work. The legal and normative support for *taking* leave is strong and hardly ever disputed. Taking leave is, in that sense, not a major problem. And although law strictly forbids any kind of punishment against parents who have been on leave, there is also a need to study the *re-entering* of the workplace. It is not really known how father's re-entrance at work is experienced and implemented by fathers and employers.

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