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The Business of Fatherhood

Professional Fathers' Parental Leave Experience in the U.S. and Sweden

by

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Sociology Honors Thesis

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ABSTRACT

This project examines the cultural differences and similarities between middle class professional fathers in the U.S. and Sweden. These men face extremely different state structured programs, which may or may not provide benefits to ease the pressures of the early years of parenthood. We might expect that differences in welfare state policies result in differences in how people experience parenthood. On the other hand, some welfare state policies of more recent origin may reflect common gendered dynamics. Although experiencing different cultural norms and structures, these fathers' experiences look relatively similar, their experiences with the family, their descriptions of their role as fathers, and the everyday tension between work and home. Their experiences diverge more in the time taken off work and therefore what they do in the more or less extended time and also the systems of support on which they rely. In order to combat the conflicting cultural expectations of their identities of father and worker, men in both countries use traditionally masculine business-centric language to rationalize their parent- and work-decisions.

Keywords: Fathers, Parental Leave, The United States, Sweden, Welfare, Middle Class

Sweden and the United States have vastly different approaches to government and social and welfare policies, including parental leave. The United States has always attempted to maintain a small government that intervenes little with its citizens, while Sweden's socialist tendencies prompt numerous government agencies for social support resulting in high taxes to pay for them. Swedish policies are also aimed to promote gender equality, and its parental leave benefits are often viewed as luxurious to outsiders. The U.S., on the other hand, lies at a different end of the spectrum, where less involved parental leave policies have often offered the bare minimum, providing fewer benefits than other developed nations (Newman 2012).

National policies can influence patterns in gender performances and experiences in parenting (Hyde et al. 1996). Parental leave policies can have significant effects on new parents, leading to either reductions or increases in the hardships and expenses of early parenthood, which can affect mental health, physical health, quality of relationships within the family, and produce varied family outcomes (Hyde et al. 1996). However, do these structural divergences in parental leave policies affect cultural and gender constructions in parenting? Do the two different policy approaches mold patterns of gender in parenting? In order to answer these questions, I investigate how fathers approach parenthood and perform gender in relation to parental leave policies in the United States and Sweden through ethnographic interviews.

I chose to compare these two countries because of their distinct and opposing methods to welfare. Welfare state policies can shape who is "required" to take care of children and determine legal and social support for such care. Sweden, as a social democratic state, gives its citizens the right to universal benefits, while the U.S. has an individualist and work-oriented system that seeks to reward individuals who serve the nation well (in this case by participating in

the labor force) (Haas 1992, Skocpol 2000). Although welfare policies in the U.S. offer less universal benefits than Sweden, middle and upper class individuals in the U.S. often have access to benefits of similar quality through private and corporate policies supported by their employers. The experiences in fathering in the U.S. and Sweden depend greatly on class, (as well as race, ethnicity, and sexuality); however, for this study I focus on middle class professional fathers in order to compare the similarities within these experiences despite the larger structural policies. This comparison of fathers in similar social positions in diverse national contexts allows me to understand how national and cultural difference influence parenting, while isolating material conditions and gender ideologies that may cross national boundaries.

I chose to study middle class professional fathers as I expected to find similar ideologies of parenting, relationships to work, expectations of career and life paths, and access to resources. The timing of this study fits along with a larger global movement of men and fathers increased participating more in children's lives, which may or may not be reflected in social policies. How then, do fathers navigate what women have been trying to figure out for decades: the ability to hold the identity of worker and parent. I also attempt to understand whether there are presumptions of who is more systemically positioned to take care of children. Despite the national differences, I found that the two groups of fathers approach parenting their children in similar ways.

To get to this conclusion, the research addresses questions of how parental leave and other welfare policies relating to child-rearing influence gender performances in parents, specifically in the perceptions of masculinity performed by fathers, in the United States and Sweden. How are these experiences of masculinity and fatherhood different or similar? By

understanding what basic support is supplied by each social welfare system to parents (focusing in on early years in child-rearing, such as preschool, leave benefits, and other forms of support), this study provides insight into the cultural expectations of parents and how these expectations are shaped by gender. I find that while the two countries' systems produce different expectations of fathers in general, the participants' social class status allow for similar access to resources, therefore creating parallel experiences, maintaining a gendered experience and expectations in parenting norms and paid employment across national borders. These similarities show that the social institutions of class, work, and the family mitigate the intended effects of parental leave policies.

CASE SELECTION

This research stems from a simple observation I had in the summer of 2017. While walking around during the daytime in different large cities in the United States and Europe, I noticed far more men with strollers on the streets in Stockholm, Sweden than in the United States, where I almost exclusively saw women with strollers and children. This pushed me to ask: why could this be? I point to the differences in cultural norms which are reinforced by social policies. The following section provides context to family-oriented welfare policies in the two countries, which help structure and support these parental norms.

The United States, before the 1993 Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), had been the only industrialized nation without a federal family leave policy (Hyde et al. 1996). Still today, benefits granted to U.S. parents remain fewer than most developed nations, as the FMLA includes no paid parental leave. The FMLA requires employers to provide a job-guarantee,

continue any employer-provided health plan, and allow 12 weeks of unpaid leave for all parents. Time taken off work for parental leave can, however, be taken from workers paid vacation or personal leave days (Hyde et al. 1996). The FMLA includes no national paid parental leave and only extends to workers at private companies with 50 or more workers, often requiring at least 12 months of employment with an employer before becoming eligible. The FMLA is available to parents of a newborn, newly adopted child, or foster child. The FMLA can be adapted for further expansion by individual state governments; however, more comprehensive paid parental leave programs can only be found in four states.¹ Other options for new parents are limited in the U.S., but can be found through state-run disability insurance policies, which depending on state, can grant access to leave, mostly for women who have given birth.

The Swedish Parental Leave Act of 1995 includes benefits that go beyond those in the United States' FMLA. Parents are entitled to 480 days of paid leave. Each parent has the right to sixty days of the parental leave and the remaining 360 days can be divided how parents wish; however, if they choose to divide the 360 days evenly, parents receive a “equality bonus” (Suwada and Plantin 2014). During the first 13 of the 16 months, parents receive almost 80% of their normal salary,² and the final 3 months parents receive a flat rate living wage. Even unemployed parents can receive paid parental leave, in addition to other welfare support. Leave can be taken until the child is eight years old and until that age parents have the right to reduce working hours by 25%.

¹ This is subject to change as work is currently being done by within state governments to change and create new parental leave policies.

² However some private employers also include additional wage support. Some of my interviewees received up to 90% of their salary during leave.

The vastly different approaches to parental leave policies in Sweden and the U.S. have a real impact on parents' ability to spend time with their child and balance financial stability. These two cases show one country with a strong welfare state and an avowed commitment to changing gender patterns in parenting and another country with a limited welfare state in which there are minimal efforts to changing gender patterns in parenting. The different approaches show that social understandings of parental and family responsibilities have significant implications on social policy and parental patterns.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The changing roles of fathers in children's lives have been analyzed in both Sweden and the United States; however, the experiences of professional fathers in the two countries have yet to be compared. While the policies themselves can give some insight into cross-cultural differences, they are an entry point to learn more about how parents, and fathers in particular, approach parenting according to their gender and society. Without understanding the changing construction of gender, the family, and how the policies in place affect these, the structural barriers for those without the privilege of these fathers will continue to be reinforced, disadvantaging those who inhabit the space outside the heteronormative family structure. By comparing this privileged population of men in Sweden and the U.S. and then connecting this comparison to the two different systemic approaches, I am able to provide insight on the way class and gender are understood in relationship to social policy and parenting.

Gender, Parenting, and Work

When the mechanisms of gender become invisible and embedded within society, the socially constructed definition of gender becomes labeled as natural and normalized, which creates gender inequality and defines gender as a mutually exclusive binary (Scott 1986, Hays 1993). Throughout the twentieth century, this gender binary was partitioned along traditional divisions of public and private spheres. The normalization of separate spheres remains embedded in social perceptions of gender, work, and the family today (Damaske 2011). This construction of gender rings true in both countries, however appears in different ways. Social policies have reinforced the gender difference found between the public and private spheres. The divide between these spheres constructs a dichotomy that pushes parents to often choose between the two. This creates a larger structural paradox that does not allow parents to inhabit both spheres.

Sharon Hays (1996) examines of the cultural contradictions of intensive mothering, explaining that “there is an underlying assumption that the child absolutely requires consistent nurture by a single primary caretaker and that the mother is the best person for the job” (Hays 1996: 8). Mothers, since entering the paid labor force, have faced a double bind of both performing their expected feminine duties of being a good mother and also breaking down the barrier to the public sphere of more professional and higher paying jobs in order to fight for gender equality. These women face the high expectation of intensive mothering, “a child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor intensive, and financially expensive approach to mothering,” which is framed as an uncontrollably irrational, yet natural behavior for women, and not for men (Hays 1993: 8). Dual-income households have intensified parenting, but have done so in ways that disproportionately affect mothers (Hays 1996., Stone 2008, Damaske 2011). The idea that mothers must and will put their children above their own needs is connected

to the understanding that women are less loyal employees, inevitably pushing women out of professional employment (Stone 2008, Damaske 2011). As these assumptions are a result of the separate spheres ideology, these qualities are then opposed by the masculine role. Men's roles as breadwinners and good providers emphasize their participation in the paid labor force and lack thereof in the home (Marsiglio et al. 1995).

The harsh tensions found between intensive mothering and paid labor are cultural contradictions visible in both the United States and Sweden. These countries have created different approaches to align the contradictions to the dominant ideology of gender, regardless of welfare state regimes. Professional women are expected to change their logic and "natural" instincts in child rearing in order to succeed in paid labor; however, men are not held to the same standard. While the model of intensive mothering has transitioned to intensive parenting, fathers remain distinct from mothers as they are seen as distant from the irrational and natural side of parenting (Hays 1996). This means there must also be implications that fathering is rational, by being framed in their identity as paid employees. Then, we might anticipate that the connections between work, parenting, and households take on distinct characteristics that have more to do with gender structures than with welfare state policies.

While women face hostility and reduced prospects for advancement in taking parental leave, men hold a more privileged role in making parenting-decisions (Damaske 2011, Stone 2008). Men are further removed from imposed gender norms of work and the family, as child-rearing is embedded as feminine work. Therefore, their masculine identity as a worker is not at risk when choosing to take leave, as it is for women. That being said, men, who have traditionally occupied the public sphere, may encounter greater resistance to exiting or taking

time away from such positions and entering the private sphere. Resistance to fathers' participation in the home, however, comes from stigmatization of men not being able to perform the masculine role of the "breadwinner" or "good provider" (Marsiglio et al. 1995). While men are no longer expected to be the sole breadwinner, the masculine ideal of breadwinner remains (Melzer 2018). Men's active participation in child-rearing has been relatively slow to change, which some argue is a result of a lack of "exposure to appropriate paternal role models," education, and the social support to cultivate more involvement with the process of child-rearing (Marsiglio et al. 1995: 21). The good provider and breadwinner models remain tied in men's ability to have successful careers and identity as paid employees (Barber 2008).

While much of this remains the same, there is a new category in fathers' masculinity. Gayle Kaufman (2013) finds that there are new expectations of fathers, namely to perform the role of the involved father. In this position father do not yet dismiss their role to contribute monetarily, but also no longer base their parental role solely on the breadwinner identity (Kaufman 2013). These fathers make small, but significant changes, in their work schedule, continuing to feel the tension between work and family life. By doing this, the fathers receive a moral bonus for attempting to reshape their relationship to masculinity, the home, and the family.

Kaufman defines the participatory father as the new norm, but continues expressing another model, *superdad*, which is further removed from the traditional fatherhood role. *Superdads* allow "shared parenting and greater involvement with their children drive their decisions, especially when it comes to changing jobs and careers" (Kaufman 2013: 142). As Kaufman's term suggests, these men gain tremendous gratitude for "going above and beyond" what is expected, rather than mothers who encounter increased barriers for putting their children

first (Hays 1996, Damaske 2011). Men who do perform the *superdad* role do so by changing their relationship to work, by becoming a stay-at-home dad, for example. These men, however, are still seen as outliers, as defying social norms and abandoning their economic and masculine power (Melzer 2018).

While many men are embracing ideological changes to parenting and the dual career household model, practices have yet to keep up (Melzer 2018). Today, mothers continue to spend approximately double the time with their kids than fathers (Melzer 2018). Additionally, stay-at-home dads in the U.S. are only 16% of all at-home parents (Melzer 2018). Fathers are not as involved as mothers because men's time consists more of play and more detachment (Yeung et al. 2001). A study performed in 2001 shows that fathers are seen mostly as engaging in personal care activities, play and companionship activities, achievement-related activities, household activities, and social activities (Yeung et al. 2001). The lack of change can especially be seen in the recurrent gender wage gap. This occupational segregation and dominance of women's childrearing responsibilities are mirrored by a lack of state programs that could offset these unequal responsibilities (Melzer 2018). The devaluation of women's paid and unpaid work continues to make men reluctant of pursuing the role of the more involved father (Melzer 2018).

The Welfare State and Family Policies

Gender norms have become institutionalized by the state in welfare and political regimes, which have the ability to legally constrict and constrain the perceptions and performances of gender. These legal and political boundaries of gender produce real outcomes, which inform the

way actors are expected to interact with the state, society, and other individuals. The state has equal ability to reproduce and reinforce notions of gender as social and cultural structures.

The Swedish centralized welfare state relies on principles of universalism, redistribution of economic resources, and solidarity (Kananen 2014). Sweden has a long standing history of advocating for equal participation of fathers in child-rearing, with an especially energetic push from the early 1960s forward (Haas 1992). The rise of familial welfare and advocating for shared parental responsibility stemmed from a concern for population decrease and declining birth rates in the 1930s. In 1934, Alva and Gunnar Myrdal argued in their book, *Kris i befolkningsfrågan* (*Crisis in the Population Question*) for a pronatalist policy in which the government should find a way for women to combine parenting and paid employment (Haas 1992). The Myrdals also recommend the lifting the ban on the sale of and information on contraceptives, the legalization of abortion, and the creation of a new sex education curriculum.

The Swedish Population Committee adapted their vision lifting the ban on contraceptive and addressed sexual health education. In 1937 it became law that women could no longer be dismissed for getting married or pregnant and a voluntary unpaid maternity leave of three months leave was put into place. This leave policy was later extended to six months in 1945 and changed in 1955 to give mothers paid leave for three of the six months. Father-specific months were introduced twenty years later, however were met with controversy (Klinth 2008). While Sweden's emphasis in social policy in the 1930s did have positive effects, nothing was really done to push women into the paid labor force until the 1950s.

The image of the "new father" in Sweden was created in the 1970s. The idea of a singular masculine breadwinner was replaced with new notions of family compositions of dual-earner and

dual-carer partnerships. Sweden's parental leave insurance, starting in January 1974, was the first paid paternity leave policy, beginning the long standing implementation of social policy which focused on fathers as caregivers and not just providers. In doing so, policy makers were attempting to create gender equality by "getting mom a job and making dad pregnant" (Klinth 2008: 20). These movements have been influenced by the Swedish ideology of *jämställdhet* (equality), which relies on the framework of "all humans being worth economic and social investments for the benefit of future development of society" (Kananen 2014: 2). However, ideals of equality have always rested neatly with the Swedish cultural aim of sameness. Sameness in culture, clothing, language, religion, ethnicity, and race help socialist structures maintain goals of equality.³

The welfare state in the United States, on the other hand, has a less straightforward history. The American decentralized welfare system contains targeted, means-tested programs with severe stigmatization of the poor and working-poor (Campbell 2014). These populations are often labeled "undeserving." Social assistance programs in the United States are therefore understood as poor relief created around the principle of "less eligibility," which are seen as taking from the more "deserving" portion of the population (Campbell 2014, Skocpol 2000). These mean-tested programs rely on being the worst possible option, to compensate for the cultural fear of the "undeserving" taking from the government and "hard working" citizens (Campbell 2014). Private and corporate welfare and non-profits in U.S. are also important in understanding the American welfare system as they are the supports for many Americans when raising children.

³ It is important to keep in mind that as Sweden becomes less homogenous, the nation is facing problems with xenophobia and racism, which challenge cultural equality for those with the status of "other."

In the United States, maternal welfare benefits started in the early 1900s when childbirth could mean death, and raising children was classified as a women's contribution to a healthy future generation. Family policies focused on women as non-workers, reinforcing the social understanding that dual-income earner family model threatened women's primary roles as mothers and wives (Albiston 2010). The most important key policy change prior to the FMLA was Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which provided employment protections on the basis of identities (Albiston 2010). Women could no longer be fired for becoming pregnant, but companies still did not have to offer maternity leave. Women's movements of the 1970s and 1980s attempted to reconcile the idea that women could perform in both spheres. These movements fought against forms of gender discrimination in the workplace, as more women were moving into the paid labor force and pursuing careers, while still performing roles of motherhood.

The American father's identity of the breadwinner was first jilted in the 1930s during the Great Depression when many men lost their jobs (Griswold 1993). As a result, the U.S. welfare state created targeted work programs for men as a part of New Deal work relief. These programs actually discriminated against women's participation in the paid workforce, solidifying the notion of the nuclear family and women's place in the home (Griswold 1993). This shows how American welfare policies have historically been used to cement gender roles in the family. Later, in 1970s, new fatherhood ideals came along with feminist movements, which pushed for fathers to show greater commitment to the family (Griswold 1993). These attempts to change the structure of the family were and still are somewhat surface level, as there have been no real policy changes implemented to push fathers to further participate in parenting.

These two cases show one country with a strong welfare state and an avowed commitment to changing gender patterns in parenting and another country with a limited welfare state in which there were minimal efforts to changing gender patterns in parenting. The different approaches show that social understandings of parental and family responsibilities have significant implications on social policy and parental patterns.

METHODS

In order to grasp how these structural divergences and social perceptions of gender in parenting affect fathers in both Sweden and the U.S., I conducted qualitative research to examine the parental patterns in professional fathers. My primary source of data comes from in-depth, semi-structured interviews with recent fathers.⁴ I interviewed fathers in Stockholm, Sweden and Minneapolis and St. Paul, MN, U.S.A during the summer and fall of 2018. I gathered a total of fourteen interviews, eight with fathers in Sweden and six with fathers in the U.S. The participants ranged in age, age of their child or children, as well as career. There was some variation in class, although most fathers were middle to upper middle class and held professional jobs. All interviewees were in heterosexual partnerships with women and most were married. All except one participant of the 14 interviewees were white.

I conducted single session interviews with each participants. Interviews ranged from 20-45 minutes long. The majority of these interviews were conducted in person, with the exception of three phone interviews. As I am bilingual, I conducted interviews in the U.S. in

⁴ The parameters for the study were fathers who had a child in approximately the past two years. All names of study participants, their partners, and children in this paper are pseudonyms and personal information of interviewees has been omitted.

English and interviews with fathers in Sweden in Swedish, which I later translated into English. As not all words have direct translations, and I am not a trained translator, the translations are my interpretations of the best way illustrate what participants explained to me.⁵

My interviews largely focused on questions related to parental leave policies, time off work, and work-family life balance in early fatherhood. I recruited interview participants through snowball sampling. I acknowledge that snowball sampling can create biases, such as participants knowing each other, coming from similar social locations, political ideologies, and that the participants included often worked in similar industries, which showcase the social location of myself and those within my network. However such risks are reduced as I am not sampling from a small, tightly connected group. Although attempting to reach more diverse networks, my study remained dominated by white middle class professional men in heterosexual partnerships. This reflects the downsides to snowball sampling; however, it also shows a greater cultural norm of family structures as seen in middle class professions.

ANALYSIS

At the beginning of my research, I expected to find vastly different approaches to parenting in Sweden and the U.S. based on the systems in place; however, I found surprisingly more similarities between middle class parents' early fatherhood experiences in both countries. The similarities appear to be attributed to the parents' class culture and capital, allowing them to access resources and maneuver through comparable spaces, which produced akin experiences in

⁵ This is a skill set I possess through my bicultural upbringing and identity.

the two countries. While the two cases are not the same they contain similar effects and causes, which is surprising, because of the differences in the systems and cultures.

The two cases also diverge, especially in the father's relationship to the parental leave period. Yet spanning the divide, both groups expressed their hope for greater involvement of fathers in children's lives in becoming the norm and to allow larger structures (state or corporate) to foster this change. However, are these fathers' conceptions of their own parental roles actually reducing gender inequality in parenting?

The expression of the men's masculinity, which could be seen in the way they discussed their responsibilities and expectations of fatherhood, overlapped. Although the men in the U.S. showed a larger range of difference in this expression of parental priorities, the fathers in Sweden performed analogous approaches to their role as parents and partners. The larger differences were found in the benefits gained from the social policies, time actually spent on leave, and support systems that were turned to outside of state support. Through the next section I will first explore my participants' experiences starting with their leave taking decisions. I will follow this with the fathers' leave time, and finish discussing how the men navigated balancing work and family after their leave period. I will then explore the aforementioned question to understand how these fathers' responses are placed into the larger structures of gender and parenting roles.

Who Takes Leave and For How Long

As expected, the fathers in Sweden took more leave time on average than those in the U.S. All the parents in the study had taken leave or reduced working hours, or were planning to

do so.⁶ The average leave taken by Swedish fathers was over 7 months, ranging between 4 and a half months to 10 months of time off work. In the U.S., two of the fathers were working part-time, otherwise leave time ranged from 2 weeks to 10 weeks, with an average of 5.5 weeks of those who took full-time leave.

When asking Swedish fathers about their parental leave time, the normalization of paternity leave became clear. In talking about their experience within a larger context, most interviewees explained that they would consider it odd for a father to not take his leave. Swedish fathers do not feel pressured to stay at work. This time off of work, outside of the career, is not controversial. Sven, a Swedish father, explains this, reflecting that there has been a shift in paternity leave since he began work ten years ago: “It’s more expected for father to want to stay at home, it’s not a crazy thing. It is also more expected that you will take time off, and nobody raises their eyebrows at it.” The expectation for all fathers to take leave was mirrored by other study participants, and almost all of the men cited the same ratio of the mom-dad split as Sven, “My impression is that the mothers are home 11 to 13 months and fathers take about 3-7 months, probably.”

Most of the Swedish participants were aware that parents still rarely split leave time evenly, and are of the opinion that fathers still need to participate more in their children’s lives. This idea is strengthened by statistics, as in 2017, 27.6% of parental leave days were taken by fathers.⁷ While the number of fathers taking leave has increased, as it was only 20% in 2005, the population as a whole continues to be “reluctant to use it,” despite the generous and unique

⁶ The comparison does include one major outlier, Mattias in Sweden, a working class father in his early twenties, who was still in school and had not taken leave but wanted to so in the future.

⁷ Försäkringskassan Statistik 2017 and Labour Force Survey, Statistiska Centralbyrån.

policy offered in Sweden (Klinth 2008: 22). The interviewees who split their leave approximately evenly with their spouses, Sven, Karl, and Anders (as well as some of the fathers who took less) told me that the system is less equal than it appears. Karl, for example, summarizes this motif well by saying:

What I think is interesting is that from the exterior Sweden looks very equal, but the majority of the fathers I know didn't take as long [leave time] as the mothers. It is expected that women still should spend more time at home, that it isn't 50/50. (Karl, Sweden)

The use of paternity leave may be more normalized, but not all fathers have adapted the program, or are able to do so. As my study population is the professional father, they are more likely to take leave than actors in other social locations.

Much like the middle class fathers in Sweden, those in the United States, are more likely to take leave and leave for longer than lower-income parents. The fathers in the U.S. took less leave time off work than their Swedish counterparts. The corporate policies available to professional fathers provide a more economically feasible option to take leave than working class parents who do not have these leave benefits. Taking paternity leave, however, is still not the norm for the middle class. The lack of normalization of paternity leave can be seen in the way most of the U.S. fathers, who were able to take more time off, framed their experiences. They did this by expressing their circumstances as special or as gratitude for having understanding co-workers and bosses. The word progressive often came up in describing company policies that offered paid time off for 8 or 10 weeks. Grant, like many of the fathers, connects his ability to take leave to his boss' kindness:

When our older son was born I was able to take about 8 weeks off, which is great, I mean, I think for the U.S. context it's very unusual, especially to be able to take paternity leave. I had a boss at the time who was very supportive of that, in fact he'd taken 6 months off with his first child and so that made it really easy to do that. (Grant, U.S.)

Many of the fathers in the U.S. also reflected hope for changes in parental leave policies, to become better for all parents. Steven made a passionate argument for the need of better policies, reflecting on his current situation of working full-time with a 6-week old baby at home:

I feel like the policies that we were talking about earlier, in Sweden and other places, are so much more humane. I feel like I've been pretty productive the last few weeks. But I just think that there is a lot of benefits to the employer too, to give people the opportunity to do their parenting, bonding stuff and then come back to work when they are ready, it just makes so much sense to me. (Steven, U.S.)

Steven finished our interview by noting his frustration that he had encounter negative interactions with co-workers because of his prioritization of his family and leave stating, "it still irks me that there would be any [negative encounters], I just think that this should be such a basic concept, that it shouldn't be controversial or require any special dispensation or what have you."

The difference in the normalization of leave in the two countries not only had an effect on the parents' experiences, but their consideration of whether or not to take leave and for how long. The structures already in place allowed parents in Sweden to not question their employers' reaction to them taking leave, as all interviewees in Sweden said their employers and co-workers reacted positively to their news of becoming a parent and that they felt no pressured to not take leave.

As far as other considerations, many parents in both countries cited more biological reasons for when they choose to take leave, like if their partner was attempting to breastfeed. Some fathers planned their leave time around preschool start time, pre-planned vacations, or national holidays. Other common themes in making the decision of how long to take leave included benefits of the leave policies and the economic burden of taking time off work. All of

the fathers mention wanting to spend time with their child, to have bonding time as a reason for taking leave or time off work.

Parenting Divisions

The fathers frame their parental leave decisions in many lights. The structure of Swedish parental leave affects this conversation differently, as the policy allows parents to decide who takes what leave of the 480 days. In the U.S. the amount of time available is instead linked to corporate policies in each parent's workplace. I found that mothers are more likely to take additional leave beyond their employers' leave policies, while the fathers would be more likely to only take the time off within the parameters given to them (Stone, 2008). Similar to Kaufman's understanding of the new expectations and roles of fathers, the men in the U.S. are performing the involved father role. While I find that the difference cultural approach to parenting in Sweden shapes the father to somewhere between the involved parent and *superdad*, the men are not praised in the same way as they are in the U.S., showcasing in difference in fatherhood involvement norms in the two countries. Nevertheless, both groups of fathers reflect the moral benefits of choosing to perform the involved father role, which opens up additional access to resources in navigating the contradictions of parenting.

All of this, along with points made by interviewees like Steven, shows that the U.S. still does not have policies in place that give women (and men) enough time to grapple with this change in their life, recover from birth, other medical complications, and normal anxiety of parenting. Based on my research, I found that the fathers in both countries mostly negotiated their decisions of when to take leave after their spouses had already made their own decisions.

This shows that there is an ever-present difference in expectations of mothers and fathers. I would argue that this is not purely biological, but also culturally ritualized.

While not all the men overtly stated that they made their own leave decisions based on that of their partner, those who did not, did hint at it. There are two main themes in which the fathers presented their experiences which show structural gender differences in the parental roles. First, the men mostly negotiated their decisions of when to take leave after their spouses had already done so. Then, taking leave during a later period in the childhood years. This means gender patterns are repeated through the leave time and grounded in biological differences between mother and father. Second is the aspect of the limitations that the fathers experience after taking leave. The structure of work has long been gendered and still generates attitudes that reinforce gender inequality in the workplace. The tension still experienced by the fathers between the two spheres shows this well.

As fathers continue to take leave during a later period in the childhood years, gender roles in parenting are normalized in the understanding of biological differences. Mothers' tasks are oriented toward activities that are dominated by nurture and care. When fathers take over, these tasks shift. Fathers do not only receive more feedback from their children, but also interact more with a greater social realm outside of the household, translating the domestic sphere external from the home. Fathers are found to interact with their children largely in play and companionship activities and social activities, which my findings support (Yeung et al. 2001).

Fathers in both countries brought up fun or relaxing time associated with leave, wanting to take advantage of the less present tension between work and home to spend more time on themselves, often exercising or doing fun outdoor activities with their children. The men were

able to do more activities than their partners, as they took leave after their significant others, therefore being able to bond in more fun and social ways:

I feel like I have really won a lot in the relationship with my child. He thinks that dad is really fun and you notice that that happened since I started my paternity leave, that I am the more fun person. And then my partner, his mom is maybe more the secure one and some other things. Maybe that I am more the fun person, because I do fun things all day. And I have taken my leave during the time when he is old enough to think that activities are actually fun. So my partner spent the same amount of time with our son, but during that time he wasn't able to do a lot of activities, so then I have won that I am a fun person. If I had just been at work during the day, and come home and only been able to swing a little, then we wouldn't have been able to do the same kind of activities. (Gustav, Sweden)

Gustav reflects the different gendered roles of parenting by assessing that his partner is the more secure of the two and that he is able to have a more fun and relaxed relationship with his son as the pressure of intensive parenting does not fall onto his shoulders. This again shows the morally high position acquired through the men's parental attitudes and behaviors.

While many men embrace ideological changes to parenting and dual career households, there remains a gap between attitudes and practices (Melzer 2018: 151). For Swedish fathers the choice to take on more parental responsibility is more structural and expected, while in the U.S. the fathers encounter forces of resistance. These forces, however, are easier to hurdle for the men in this study because of their social location (Melzer 2018: 198).

The Language of Fathers

Men in both countries claimed it easy to remain undisturbed by work during leave. Steven captured this feeling well, as he said his leave was a long enough time that he was "pretty much totally unplugged." This sentiment was mirrored by other fathers, especially those who were able to take longer leave (more than 8 weeks). The difference between Sharon Hays'

understanding of intensive mothering and the fathers' explanations of their intensive parenting experiences is that the men are rationalizing parenthood by explaining strategic changes in their lives, as they must now take care of another human. I argue that the men are describing and rationalizing the same "irrational" and uncontrollable parenting instinct that are socialized into and disadvantage women. The men are using business language, from the more traditionally masculine sphere, in order to rationalize their prioritization of parenting and work. The fathers used language like prioritization, time-maximizing, and efficiency in their description of their parenting roles, as if they were discussing a project in the office. This business-centric discourse blurs the feminine ascribed work being done by the fathers, instead replacing it with rational and masculine descriptors. Johan in Sweden, for example said, "the biggest difference is that you learned that someone else is more important than yourself, that you have to prioritize another person before yourself." Tony in the U.S. also shows this by saying:

I want to say it's helped me manage time a lot better and realize that family time is important and that whenever I can get, I need to be there and spend time with my family, with him [his son]. But yeah, just realizing that there's a lot more than just getting up and going to work. There's family and taking care of someone else now is important. (Tony, U.S.)

The notion that someone else is more important is something that women are socialized to do before becoming mothers, through gendered expectations and models like intensive mothering (Hays 1996). While the model of intensive mothering has transitioned to intensive parenting, fathers remain distinct from mothers by their rationalization of parental "instincts," that are seen as irrational when connected to mothering. I argue that the discourse the men use replace the same irrational parenting instinct discourse that creates women's liminal place in the paid workforce. Meaning, that the men both receive benefits for their performed masculinity in

the workplace and the home, a reward that women remain unable to gain. These examples of men rationalizing intensive parenting show that parental experiences indeed remain gendered. The men are using business language from the more traditionally masculine sphere in order to rationalize the previously feminine sphere of parenting.

The less rational side of fathering comes from hegemonic masculinity which brings masculine traits such as protectiveness and possession. This is most often geared towards daughters, rather than sons. One father, Mark, showcased the use of protective and possessive hegemonic masculine language:

One thing that I didn't entirely expect was the shift in perspective, that happened to some degree when we are driving home from the hospital, and I was looking around like I was stopping to let pedestrians to cross the street, ... , and I remember thinking like all these people that were crossing the street are children of somebody, I really better not hit them with my car, ... And another thing is a political thing, I've always been annoyed by male politicians who say like, well I have daughter, and therefore I believe in women's rights or something. That always annoys me, because you shouldn't need to have direct personal contact with someone to like respect them or something. But, to my surprise as a new father of a daughter, I have now become way more militant in all my views about gender inequality, and so that has been a little surprising to me. (Mark, U.S.)

The language used by some parents, like Mark, show a more hegemonic archetype of masculinity which rely on good provider narratives to perform their role as a father (Eric Anderson 2012 and Suwada and Plantin 2014). Mark does this by showing that he is a good protector, but also is understanding of women's rights and therefore somewhat reflective of his masculine role. Andrew also voiced such values, stating:

I think when the baby is first born, there is not a whole lot that I can help with, I mean, I can help with things around the house, but as far as feeding, can't do that, really. I mean, I can clean up things and do that type of stuff, but as far as caring for the baby, there is not a ton that I can do. (Andrew, U.S.)

Andrew uses biological differences, between him and his wife, to exemplify the socialized idea that women perform more nurture in parenting. What he is expressing is the notion that somehow his wife has an “instinct” to take care of the baby, while he is in charge of making sure that family life remains stable and efficient. However, this same form of masculinity was not mirrored by all the fathers in the U.S. Another father, Grant, voiced the exact opposite opinion: “I guess the biggest impact that I can have and want to have, is with the boys and with her [his children and wife], like there is going to be work that comes and goes, but right now that’s what I want to be focused on.” Regardless of their parental responsibility ideologies, men in the U.S. seem unable to relinquish the breadwinner role as they did not receive the same financial support as fathers in Sweden.

In Sweden, the men voiced a much more uniform set of priorities in parenting, mostly focusing in the idea that they are always trying to make their decisions with their partners as evenly as possible. This reflects the policy rhetoric of gender equality and support for women already in place in Sweden. As seen in the differing mother-father parental leave ratios, this might not always be true, but the discourse of gender equality in the home and in parental responsibilities is what is expected and socialized as the right answer. However, important relationship to masculinity becomes clear through all of the fathers use of business language to distinguish their effective parenting methods in both spheres.

Support Systems

Parents in these two countries turn to particular social support systems as a result of the benefits they do and do not receive from the government or their employer leave plans. These

supports can be found in state provided services, parenting groups, friends, or family. The structural systems in place dictate larger cultural responses to what parenting means. The employer provided model in the U.S. builds loyalty between the worker and boss, making the ability to take leave seem based on relationships within the firm, not something written as a right of the employee. Sweden, on the other hand, has a state provided model, meaning all citizens are and feel entitled to be taken care of by the state, regardless of interpersonal relationships with employers or their own identity as workers. The Swedish model allows for greater flexibility. In understanding which support systems are available and important, I want to explore beyond the more obvious social policies and into the more invisible structures such as family and more general social norms which are a result of these different structural approaches. These aspects are vital to the childrearing experiences found in both the U.S. and Sweden.

In the United States the most important support system appears to be grandparents and other family member. Grandparents or other family members were brought up without my prompting in every U.S. interview.⁸ Grandparents often helped with a wide range of activities from childcare, household chores, to picking up and dropping off children from daycare on a weekly or daily basis. Steven, a lawyer in Minneapolis, explains the daily importance of these supports; “My mom or my step-mom will help my wife get the three-year-old home from school and stuff like that.” He also mentions other tasks performed by family members:

They bring over food, they’ll come out with both or one of our girls, so that we can do other stuff. We can do laundry, we can shower, like whatever, usually if they come over for dinner, they’ll bring food and clean up after dinner and do whatever other dishes are in the sink. (Steven, U.S.)

⁸ Even in the case of one father whose family lived out of state, the participant described how he had no local family, however family members did travel to support the couple after the arrival of their newborn.

Mark, a professor, reports a similar daily reliance on grandparents; “Most often it is my partner’s mother that comes over at some point in the morning and takes over the kid briefly so that I can shower and eat and get out of the house.”

In the U.S., I also found a reliance on financial supports outside of state that were not framed as a government handout, but rather as charitable acts. This appeared more frequently in participants with lower-income earnings or less stable employment. This construction shows the impact of the stigmatization related to welfare and government handouts embedded in American culture. Instead of expecting help from employers or the government, pay received during time off was framed as the employers’ gift for hard work. Tony, a young father, is a part owner of a restaurant in St Paul, which he owns with his mother. He explained his ability to get paid during time off as a gift for both him and his wife. Here he responds a question about whether he had received paid leave:

I did, because I am part owner and I didn’t ask for anything. It was just kind of my mom, again, ‘I know you need some money when you are gone.’ It was more of a gift type of thing, but it was through the company. It paid for probably a week or two off, which is about what I was off anyway (Tony, U.S.)

The attitude that he is deserving of paid leave reflects this cultural norm as earning all benefits. This is especially evident in the way he frames his need for paid leave, as he did need money, that he “didn’t ask for anything.”

The U.S. does not have universal state-run daycare programs, but there are some targeted welfare programs which aim to help lower income parents. Sweden, in contrast, has universal provided childcare for children after the age of one. Preschool entrance times were often one of the important considerations cited by Swedish fathers when deciding when they and their partner would take leave and for how long. The Swedish preschools not only provide daycare, but also

provide an important space for networking for the fathers. These meeting places are key in fathers relationships to the outside world as they do not have the same parenting support groups as mothers. As the preschools are centers for parental interactions, they are a crucial location for reinforcing and creating parenting norms.

Before the milestone of preschool is reached, parents have opportunities to bring their children to open-preschool events, which allows babies to socialize with other children, interact with the structure of daycare, and help parents find others like them going through the same phase of life. Most fathers in Sweden when asked about their social groups and friendship with other fathers point to open-preschool events or friends that had overlapping leave times and would go to such events together. Gustav, a computer software designer, explains open-preschools as “kind of like a ‘pre-preschool’ that you take your kids to and sit around and sing songs and they get to play and get maybe a little time to explore with other kids if they don’t have siblings.” He also expresses his happiness with finding other fathers through open-preschool programs:

It’s also much easier if you live in an area like this one, because here there are so many others in the same situations, there are dads all over the place. I’ve gotten to know lots of dads, that are the same age and are in the same situation, so that makes it easier to meet up with them, go to open-preschool, meet up with people in the park that are in the same situation. In living in this area, where everyone is in a similar demographic, you could say, it’s really nice. (Gustav, Sweden)

Swedish fathers’ pattern of finding friends through open-preschool events could end up reinforcing similar types of gendered patterns of behavior. The fact that the state provides this structure also means that these behaviors are normalized by the social support system. In the U.S., there is nothing comparable to open-preschools, which cater to fathers meeting other fathers. This could explain the wider array of parental attitudes in the U.S. discussed earlier. The

fathers' access to parental networks in both countries is also key in framing their perceptions of their own roles as fathers.

Parent groups in both Sweden and the U.S. have seemingly different gender expectations in what parents could get out of their time spent with others going through a similar experience. Men in Sweden were able to connect with other fathers more easily, whether through open-preschools or friends taking leave at the same time. The idea that mother's groups, however, were all-in-all more important was a theme in both sets of interviews. The divisions of mother and father groups were a similarity in both countries which showed a gendered use of parent groups. Parent groups were association with intensive mothering:

I just feel like mothers are more into the whole 'let's get together and figure this [parenting] out' than fathers. Which isn't 100% true, but from what I've seen and where, how I've grown up seeing stuff like that. (Tony, U.S.)

Father groups, on the other hand, were not seen as important for men. If father groups were present, they appeared to be used for a less supportive nature and more for a means to socialize and be dislocated from the parenting realm:

When the baby is born, there is usually a mother's group, they have it more, because it is so much information, but it think now it kind of fades out. Around now, they are not as frequent anymore. I don't think that will be available for me when I am off. (Sven, Sweden)

Fathers in both countries are required to use their cultural and social capital to receive comradery from other parents during their leave, as opposed to mothers, who are urged, regardless of social location, to partake in parenting groups when they become pregnant or mothers. Mothers also have and are expected to need more clear structural support and social groups. The lack of both cultural and social support for father groups, in the same way that women's participation in mother groups are expected, show the embedded gendered differences in parental performances

and expectations. The variations in support systems also highlight the importance of social networks in creating more consistent gender performances and parental responsibility ideologies found in Sweden. These findings may reflect the greater consistency in parental norms across class in Sweden.

Tension between Home and Work

Study participants who had access to extensive leave policies explained no hardships in asking for and taking leave; however, conflicts arose in the continued performance of the roles of parent and worker after leave. The study participants in both countries expressed the complications of competing forces of their time between their children and work. The cultural contradictions of intensive parenting and paid work appear in both sets of interviews.

While the time off work is not controversial for Swedish fathers the time back at work, presents itself as more difficult to navigate in some business environments, especially if the father is taking on a majority of childcare labor. Anders, an upper-middle class father in his late thirties, shoulders most of the childcare of his three children, because of his wife's more demanding career. He expressed his hardship with this aspect of parenting beyond the parental leave time period:

You are limited because of the child, the amount of time you can be at work. But this isn't connected to the time you have parental leave. It is much more connected to the time you have now, once the kid has started preschool, with all the dropping-off and picking-up that means you can't stay late at work. The parental leave time itself, it doesn't affect ambitions at work, that's just that it like a break, but then it's the long period when you are taking care of the child [when back at work], when they are sick, you have to go early to pick them up at preschool, that affects everything a lot more. (Anders, Sweden)

Employers expect fathers to be present throughout the whole work day and even afterwards. Employers' disregard of the dual identity of an employee as a father and worker clouds expectations and complicates the equality of childrearing after coming back to work. Mothers may experience less pressure from employers after coming back to work and therefore might be perpetually taking on more childcare responsibilities after the parental leave period. This could possibly be attributing to the greater gender imbalance post-parental leave responsibilities.

The ability to balance rewarding careers and family life are important to fathers in both countries and this observation was directly stated by Steven, "I think we both [he and his wife] wanted to find a way to balance having fulfilling professional lives, while also being present and trying to share the responsibilities of parenting as equally as possible." Fathers in Sweden and the U.S. mentioned their mitigating of this dilemma by working from home outside of business hours. One study participant, Karl, explains the balancing of the two worlds as "a puzzle that you need to figure out how to piece together." Fathers' flexible hours allow them to assert more agency of when they were working and when they spend time with their children and families.

This tension between work and the home are connected to larger structures of gender. The hardships balancing the worlds of both spheres have long been experienced by women, pushing them out of the labor force or into lower paying jobs. The expected role of fathers has changed, and therein allowed for more flexibility in men's relationships to work and the home, however in doing so many continue to encounter barriers. These barriers reinforce gendered differences in parenting, such as receiving praise for being a good or involved father, showing that women are expected to perform parenting work more naturally. While other barriers may seem more obvious, like fathers only having access to eight weeks parental leave, each role plays

a part in reproducing the notions that men and women are expected to handle to process of parenting differently. This leads me to the conclusion that while parental leave policies play an important role, other social institutions, such as work and the family transform the experience of parenthood already molded by social policies.

CONCLUSION

Social attitudes about fathers are changing in both countries, as seen in all my study participants' explanations of wanting to spend more time with their children and for structural constraints of parental leave and early fatherhood to dissipate. However, these expectations are changing at different speeds and in slightly different directions. By having a focus on universal entitlement, the Swedish system sets the expectation that everybody will take leave, allowing them to explore the boundaries of fatherhood more. The explicit focus on gender inequality in parenting means fathers in Sweden do not see themselves as breadwinners but as needing to do something for their children's mothers. In the U.S. the role as breadwinner continues to play into the ideological performance of fatherhood and masculinity, as the welfare system does not provide the benefits to allow most fathers or mothers to spend a longer uninterrupted time with their child. Paid labor therefore often becomes a permanent fixture in most parental identities. The involved father model has become more normal and restrictions for middle class working fathers to take parental leave are thinning. Economic burdens, however, continue to lead parents to rely on social networks, like grandparents and other family members, not state provided programs.

While men may be moving into the private sphere, the burden of straddling paid work and family life complicates the ability to participate in both spheres. Now, men and women are sharing the complicated cultural contradictions of parenting. Based on my research, I argue that men are attempting to mold parental roles into a more masculine experience by changing the discourse and social aspects of parenting, allowing them to combine their understanding of the two realms into one framework. However, in both cases in order to complete the “extreme,” mirror all cultural expectations of mothers, sacrifices must be made to the men’s identity as a paid employee.

That parental leave decisions and gendered dimensions of fathering look so similar in the Swedish welfare state and the more privatized social welfare system in the U.S. seems surprising. The differences in parental leave structures in the U.S. and Sweden may come from different sources --employers or the state -- yet they produce similar outcomes in fathering and work-family life balance in middle class professional fathers. The time taken off work and the way it is described echo similar practices of masculinity and intensive parenting. The fathers have more in common than expected. However how shocked should we truly be? These men’s experiences of fatherhood are shaped not only by the advantages given by each welfare regime, but advantages from socioeconomic class, their identities as workers, their familial resources, their gender, their sexuality, and their race. These are social determinants that cross geographical and political borders and control global systems of power. In contrast to my study population, there are many actors disadvantaged by the systems in place, whose decisions are controlled by their class, race, or sexuality. The social policies in both countries continue to enforce other unexamined structural barriers for those without the privilege of these fathers.

Have these differences in attitudes and performances of parenting changed who is “required” to take care of children, both legally and social? It is different in each case. In Sweden part of this responsibility is shouldered by the state. The state is much more involved, meaning the cultural contradictions of parenting are mitigated by a third party. The push for gender equality in parenting then, does not mean both parents have to perform to the extent of the intensive parenting model. In the U.S. it remains that at least one parent must take the primary burden of childrearing and this cannot be done without sacrifice to the parents other identities. In both cases the idea that parenting is done somewhat differently, but the roles of fathers and mothers remains unchallenged, reproducing a naturalization of gender-defined roles in parenting.

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