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# Why Is Part-Time Unpaid Parental Leave (Still) Gendered?

## Narratives and Strategies of Couples in Spain

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### **Abstract**

This article examines men's and women's reasoning regarding part-time unpaid parental leave use strategies once paid leave ends by using 52 original interviews conducted with highly educated men and women aged 24 to 35 years in stable partnerships in Spain. We identify three part-time unpaid parental leave use strategies concealing six different narratives. Our results offer interesting gender discrepancies that reveal intended unpaid leave use arrangements. Our comparison of men's and women's narratives suggests that men seem to overestimate the egalitarianism within their relationships by being highly predisposed to take unpaid leave. Our analysis indicates that economic uncertainty and labor-market barriers (including persistent gender inequality) perpetuate a gendered use of this gender-neutral policy even among couples who show strong gender-egalitarian attitudes.

**Keywords:** part-time parental leave, gender roles, relative resources, Spain, qualitative

# **Why Is Part-Time Unpaid Parental Leave (Still) Gendered?**

## **Narratives and Strategies of Couples in Spain**

### **Introduction**

Men's use of parental leave confers important benefits to couples' and children's well-being. The use of parental leave by men has been reported to be positively associated with greater couple relationship satisfaction and intimacy (Petts & Knoester, 2019), a reduction in the partner's gender wage gap (Andersen, 2018) and a stronger bond between parents and their children (Petts & Knoester, 2018; Petts, Knoester, & Waldfogel, 2019). However, despite the relatively recent efforts by some governments to encourage men to take parental leave, men rarely use such leave (Lammi-Taskula, 2008; Meil, 2013), especially when it is unpaid (Fernandez-Lozano, 2018). Spain is no exception (Elizalde- San Miguel, Díaz Gandasegui, & Díaz Gorfinkiel, 2019; Escobedo, Flaquer, & Navarro-Varas, 2012; Escot, Fernández-Cornejo, & Poza, 2014; Lapuerta, Baizán, & González, 2011; Romero-Balsas, 2013).

After the initial implementation of the gendered paid parental leave system, which is broadly used by Spanish mothers and fathers, the lack of wage replacement in the subsequent gender-neutral parental leave system makes many Spanish dual-earner couples unable to use the system. Nevertheless, if such leave is used, it is taken more often by mothers than fathers (Elizalde- San Miguel et al., 2019; Escot et al., 2014; Lapuerta et al., 2011). For example, in the case of the reduced work schedule, which is a right in Spain (part-time unpaid parental leave), only 4.1% of fathers have ever used it, whereas the number of mothers using it has increased to 25.8% (Fernandez-Lozano, 2018). This situation raises intriguing questions regarding the

reasons and decision-making process of couples. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to explore the narratives underlying the use of part-time unpaid parental leave and the decision-making process of parents and prospective parents in Spain. To achieve this goal, this study examines men's and women's voices separately to better understand the reasons and decision-making processes, which is one of the novelties of this study. Given the minimal use of full-time leave due to the lack of wage replacement and the difficulties of living under only one salary, in this study, we focus on the use of part-time leave (reduction of working hours) rather than full-time leave.

The recent literature has highlighted the importance of two main driving forces influencing the low usage of parental leave by men (Castro-García & Pazos-Moran, 2015; Geisler & Kreyenfeld, 2011; Koslowski & Kadar-Satat, 2019). The first factor is the persistence of traditional gender-role norms at the individual and institutional levels. The second factor involves the labor-market conditions and job characteristics of each parent in the labor context of a rigidly gendered culture. Therefore, although Spanish society's gender-role attitudes have substantially evolved towards more egalitarian attitudes (Arpino, Esping-Andersen, & Pessin, 2015; Comas-d'Argemir & Soronellas, 2019; Domínguez-Folgueras, Jurado-Guerrero, & Botía-Morillas, 2018), previous research has shown that more traditional gender-role behaviors persist (Abril et al., 2015). Indeed, once young couples become parents, gender inequality within the household increases (Domínguez-Folgueras, 2015; Young & Schieman, 2018). However, the role of the institutional dimension in individuals' decision-making is crucial. In fact, resolving the work-family conflict remains a pending subject in many post-industrial societies, including Spain (Brinton, Bueno, Oláh, & Hellum, 2018). In addition, the impact of the Great Recession in Spain, which led to high levels of unemployment, cannot be neglected (Grau-Grau, 2013;

Lombardo, 2017), rendering Spain a very engaging and fruitful case study. How do gender egalitarianism and partners' relative resources in a context of economic uncertainty interact in the part-time unpaid parental leave use decision-making of our interviewees and their partners?

To address these issues, we analyze the narratives of 52 men and women aged 24-35 years in stable partnerships. Interviews were conducted in 2012 in Madrid and Barcelona. Our analysis contextualizes respondents' narratives with both partners' labor-force participation and working conditions, their gender-role attitudes towards parenthood, their gender-role behaviors with regard to housework and childcare, and their attitudes towards family policies. This study focuses on the couple-level circumstances of each interviewee rather than their individual characteristics.

The paper is organized as follows. We next present the theoretical frame and how it guides our analysis. We then contextualize the Spanish case and provide an overview of developments in family policy provisions. After introducing the data and methodological aspects, we provide the results of our study. Finally, we address the contributions of our work and suggest some implications.

### **Labor-Market Conditions and Gender-Role Attitudes: Two Competing Explanations**

To understand the rationale underlying men's and women's perceptions and strategies once paid leaves end, this study is rooted in two main interrelated factors that shape couples' decisions regarding their use of parental leave: labor-market conditions and gender-role attitudes at both the individual and couple levels.

Job conditions, such as working hours, flexibility, job stability, and income, may facilitate or hinder parents' use of unpaid parental leave. For example, the use of leave by other coworkers (Beglaubter, 2017; Lapuerta et al., 2011), an employer's positive attitude (Bygren &

Duvander, 2006; Crompton, 2006), working in a family-friendly environment (Escot, Fernández-Cornejo, Lafuente, & Poza, 2012) or larger companies (Zhelyazkova & Ritschard, 2018), and working in the public sector (Beglaubter, 2017; Escot et al., 2014; Lammi-Taskula, 2008) are factors positively related to parental leave use. However, organizational barriers affect men to a greater extent than women (Duvander, 2014). Recent studies have suggested that men who use flexible policies for caring reasons suffer from such flexibility in a manner associated with greater risks of career penalties (Belope-Nguema, Fernández-Cornejo, Escot, & Del Pozo-García, 2018; Coltrane, Miller, Dehaan, & Stewart, 2013; Rudman & Mescher, 2013; Tanquerel & Grau-Grau, 2019).

However, in addition to individual characteristics, considering both partners' job characteristics is crucial for fully understanding couples' unpaid parental leave use. Due to the lack of wage replacement or partial payment of parental leave, couples often first evaluate the affordability of taking leave according to their household income (Beglaubter, 2017; Lammi-Taskula, 2008; Meil, Romero-Balsas, & Rogero-García, 2017). Thus, bargaining models have been used to explain how partners' relative earnings play a crucial role in intra-couple negotiations (Blood & Wolfe, 1960; Lundberg & Pollak, 1996). By applying this scheme to parental leave use, one could expect that among couples in which the man earns more than his partner, the woman will be more prone to take unpaid parental leave, and vice versa. However, this *bargain rule* does not apply under equal conditions between the partners (Dema Moreno & Díaz Martínez, 2014). Blood and Wolfe's theory has been largely criticized for not considering the cultural factors of individuals and society, particularly gender-role attitudes (Bittman, et al. 2003, Lundberg & Pollak, 1996). As a matter of fact, if we look at the type of contract that men and women have before and after childbirth, it is well-known how immediately after the birth of

a child, the proportion of women switching to part-time jobs increases substantially. For example, in the Spanish context, the percentage of women in part-time jobs doubled from 15.7% before being mothers to 31.3% after giving birth in 2015, whereas the percentage of men remained invariable at less than 5% (Fernández-Kranz 2018).

Scholars also agree that parental leave use is influenced by personal subjective characteristics, which are the result of social interactions and how individuals attach meanings to their roles in society (Doucet, 2009; Petts & Knoester, 2018). The “doing gender” approach (West & Zimmerman, 1987) predicts that the roles played by men and women within the family are strongly rooted in traditional gender stereotypes. Consequently, couples generally follow these gender identities once they become parents, resulting in women adopting the caregiver role by reducing their labor-force participation, while men assume the breadwinner role and rarely alter their time allocation (Craig & Mullan, 2010). Thus, there is extensive evidence from the U.S. and Europe regarding how the transition to parenthood reinforces traditional gender roles (Bianchi, Milkie, Sayer, & Robinson, 2000; Dribe & Stanfors, 2009; Hallberg & Klevmarcken, 2003). The “doing gender” approach is ultimately derived from identity theory and symbolic interactionism (Rane & McBride, 2000). Men’s and women’s expectations regarding their roles in the family influence their parental leave decisions. The ideals and practices of hegemonic masculinity (and intensive motherhood) are socially produced (Chesley, 2011). However, at the interactional level, men and women match their behaviors to their expectations of each other and social expectations of parental responsibilities (Lammi-Taskula, 2008; Singley & Hynes, 2005). Some authors have discussed an “undoing gender” approach (Deutsch, 2007) based on emerging non-conventional childcare patterns among new parents. In some cases, contextual factors, such as an economic crisis, underly a gender-role change at the societal level (Chesley, 2011;



Domínguez-Folgueras et al., 2018). However, scholars have noted that contradictions between attitudes and practice may coexist (Beglaubter, 2017; Deutsch, 1999; Domínguez-Folgueras et al., 2018). Thus, Petts et al. (2018, p. 704) conclude that in the U.S. case, “despite changing expectations for fathers, hegemonic masculine norms continue to shape fathers’ behavior.”

In this work, we aim to bridge these two bodies of literature and explore the existing interconnections between partners’ labor-market characteristics and gender-role attitudes to shed light on the rationale underlying the use of part-time unpaid parental leave. Accordingly, the study posed the following research questions:

- 1) Do couples in which both partners plan to take part-time unpaid parental leave include men more committed to gender egalitarianism and women with greater bargaining power?
- 2) Do couples in which men are not planning to take part-time unpaid parental leave, while their partners are, hold more traditional gender-role attitudes and include men who have greater bargaining power?
- 3) Do couples in which neither of the partners plans to take part-time unpaid parental leave hold gender-egalitarian attitudes and share similar financial resources?

Thus, this study aims to advance and enrich the research on the use and potential use of part-time unpaid parental leave by highlighting how men and women negotiate and perceive these policies in a very changing context, such as that represented by Spain, using 52 original interviews conducted with highly educated men and women aged 24 to 35 years in stable partnerships in Spain.

## The Spanish Parental Leave System and Its Use

The characteristics of parental leave, such as length, wage replacement rate, and qualification requirements, inevitably transmit a message regarding social attitudes towards childcare (Meil et al., 2017). Hence, a gendered paid parental leave system in which the maternity allowance is longer than the paternity allowance, as in the case of Spain, reinforces traditional gender roles (Lapuerta et al., 2011). However, although still insufficient and far from egalitarian (Flaquer, 2004), family policy development has evolved positively in recent years in Spain. Paternity and maternity leave are both fully paid, and returning to the same job position is assured. Mothers are entitled to 16 weeks of leave, and the six first weeks are mandatory. The remaining 10 weeks can be taken by mothers or fathers<sup>1</sup>. However, between 2008 and 2011, less than 2% of fathers used the weeks transferable from maternity leave (Escot et al., 2014; Flaquer & Escobedo, 2014). Even though fathers are entitled to 12 weeks of paternity leave since January 2020, they were entitled to only 15 days<sup>2</sup> when the fieldwork in this study was conducted (in 2012). This type of “daddy quota” is a use-it-or-lose-it right, and some studies have echoed the increasing use of paternity leave after the 2007 reform, wherein 13 days were added to the previous two days (Escot et al. 2014, Fernández-Cornejo et al. 2018). In addition, both parents are entitled to paid (breast)feeding leave. During the first nine months of the child’s life, the mother or<sup>3</sup> the father can be absent one hour per day for breastfeeding (this hour can be split into

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<sup>1</sup> Since January 1st 2020, the number of transferable weeks was reduced to two weeks since paternity allowance increased to 12 weeks.

<sup>2</sup> From the 1930s to 2007, paternity leave consisted of two days. In 2007, 13 more days were added. Later, paternity leave increased to four weeks in January 2017, to five weeks in July 2018, to eight weeks in April 2019, and to 12 weeks in January 2020. There is a provision to extend paternity leave to 16 weeks in January 2021, achieving parity between the two parents.

<sup>3</sup> Until 2019, only one parent, the mother or the father, was entitled to take breastfeeding leave. Since 2019, this entitlement has become individual and non-transferable.

two half hours during the day). The law also allows compacting these hours to an equivalent period of full-time days (Meil, Lapuerta, and Escobedo, 2019). Fathers were entitled to use the breastfeeding leave since 1989; however, men hardly ever use it (Escot, Fernández-Cornejo, and Poza 2014).

After paid leave, there are two types of gender-neutral unpaid parental leave as follows: full-time leave and part-time leave; the latter is the focus of this study. Full-time leave consists of up to three unpaid years of leave during which organizations must maintain the employee's same job position during the first year and the same job category during the second and third year. In contrast, part-time leave—regulated by law since 1999—allows the parent to reduce his or her working hours by between 1/8 and 1/2, with a proportional salary reduction. Part-time leave can be taken until the child is 12 years old. At the time this study was conducted (2012), this measure could be applied until the child was eight years old. For the period 2005-2009, Escot et al. (2014) estimate that fathers started part-time unpaid parental leave in only 0.3% of births, compared with 5-6% for mothers. Another study found that in the case of the reduced schedule, which is a right in Spain, only 4.1% of fathers had ever used it, while the number of mothers increased to 25.8% (Fernandez-Lozano, 2018). Different quantitative studies have revealed that fathers with high educational levels working in a secure job or in the public sector were more likely to take unpaid parental leave than other fathers (Escot et al., 2014; Lapuerta et al., 2011).

Other studies have explored parents' differential use of parental leave from a qualitative perspective focusing on the under-involvement of men in early childcare. Romero-Balsas et al. (2013) concluded that there is a contrast between fathers who take shorter periods of leave and consider leave a right but not a duty and more-involved fathers who conceptualize time off as their responsibility and a commitment to their families. Similarly, the TransParent project (Abril

et al., 2015; González, Domínguez, & Luppi, 2013; González & Jurado-Guerrero, 2015; Seiz et al., 2016) has documented the emergence of a “new fatherhood” in Spain and classifies fathers as *committed*, *helper*, or *occasional* fathers. Committed fathers hold very egalitarian attitudes, have flexible working conditions, and are less career oriented than their partners.

In addition, previous studies have revealed that during an economic recession in which unemployment affects men more than women, fathers’ involvement increases (Casper & O’Connell, 1998). This fact has also been identified in Spain by González and Jurado (2015). Consistent with other scholars (Beglaubter, 2017; Deutsch, 2007; Fernandez-Lozano, 2019; Holter, 2007), these authors found that active fathers conform to the following two different profiles: those who are involved as a result of a personal commitment to gender egalitarianism and those who are involved as a result of their circumstances (i.e., unemployment or a precarious job).

In addition to the parental leave system, other factors related to childcare and families need to be addressed at the institutional level, including the public provision of childcare and parenthood-related tax benefits (Baizán, 2009). When the state does not provide enough protection to families, the availability of informal care, which is mostly provided by grandparents, is also crucial and sometimes determines parents’ parental leave decisions.

## **Data and Methods**

The data consist of 52 original in-depth semi-structured interviews<sup>4</sup> conducted with highly educated, heterosexual, native-born, urban men and women aged 24 to 35 years in stable partnerships (married or cohabiting). The data were collected between December 2011 and July

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<sup>4</sup> The data belong to a larger collaborative qualitative comparative project conducted in five countries (Japan, South Korea, Spain, Sweden and the U.S.).

2012 in Madrid and Barcelona from an equal number of men and women. The male and female samples were drawn separately (i.e., no participants were in a partnership with each other). Approximately half of the sample (N=28) were childless, and the other half (N=24) had one child. Therefore, part-time parental leave use intentions refer to the first child for childless respondents and to the second child for one-child parents. By focusing only on the highly educated, we avoid heterogeneity in the analysis. Considering the closer link between higher education and gender egalitarianism (Goldscheider, Bernhardt, & Lappegård, 2015), we purposely limit the sample to those couples in which gender-relations and labor-force participation are supposed to be more egalitarian than among less educated individuals, which should therefore offer us a cleaner analysis of couples' parental leave use strategies. We define higher education as the completion of a university degree or a post-secondary vocational program.

The recruitment of the interviewees was accomplished through snowball sampling, starting with a large number of individuals as “seeds” contacted through social media and networks and asking them for up to two referrals, a process that was repeated until all of the cells of our sampling frame were filled with the targeted number of individuals. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and in private to create an intimate atmosphere. They were conducted in Spanish by the first author and lasted from 60 to 120 minutes. All interviews were recorded and transcribed in full by a native speaker. One of the strengths of this study is the shared status of the interviewees and the interviewer (who is also a highly educated, native-born Spanish young adult within the same age range as the respondents), which enhanced mutual trust and made it easy to establish rapport (Bhopal, 2010).

We primarily coded the individuals' answers to the interview sections regarding the following: 1) labor-force participation, 2) gender-role attitudes, 3) housework and child care distribution, 4) intended use of parental leave, and 5) opinions regarding family policies. The coding was performed in several stages. During the first stage, we established structural codes to demarcate topics using qualitative analysis software (*Dedoose*). During the second stage, we inductively coded and wrote detailed memos regarding each participant. Each author inductively generated categories of participants. During the third stage, we shared our categorizations and held in-depth discussions regarding the cases one-by-one. The dual process of coding and categorization served as a strategy for the cross-validation of the data analysis. The richness of the information gathered in the interviews together with the biographical and financial information forms provided us with a very textured view of the couple-level situation.

### **Three Different Part-Time Unpaid Parental Leave Use Strategies**

The results are presented as follows. First, we present a typology of three different part-time unpaid parental leave use strategies in accordance to our three research questions. Then, to increase the richness of individual reasoning, we categorize the different narratives emerging behind the three intended part-time parental leave use strategies.

Paid parental leave use, considered by respondents as an individual right, was almost universal within our sample. However, gender differences arose and gender roles emerged in respondents' narratives when unpaid parental leave was considered. The first step of our analysis was performed to classify the interviewees based on their reported intention to take part-time unpaid parental leave and their understanding of their partners' intentions.

We distinguish among the following three different part-time unpaid parental leave use strategies: the "gender-egalitarian strategy," the "gender-specialization strategy," and the "pro-

work strategy.” First, the gender-egalitarian strategy was followed by one-third of the sample (10 men and seven women). They reported that both partners would be willing to reduce their working hours with the arrival of their first/next child. Second, the gender-specialization strategy in which only the woman plans to reduce her working hours was reported by more than half of our interviewees (13 men and 17 women), thus representing the most common strategy in our sample. Finally, a few respondents (three men and two women) reported a pro-work strategy in which neither partner plans to take part-time unpaid parental leave.

To capitalize on the richness of individual reasoning, we extended beyond the *yes or no* answer and categorized the different narratives (Table 1) emerging behind the three intended part-time parental leave use strategies.

Table 1 about here

### **Narratives of the Gender-Egalitarian Strategy**

The first strategy represents gender-egalitarian values among couples in which both partners are willing to take unpaid part-time leave. Ten men and seven women speaking on behalf of their partners belong to this group. However, this group is not homogeneous. We need to distinguish between the following two different narratives, which mainly differ on the role played by men within the couple: *egalitarian (active father)* and *egalitarian (passive father)*.

#### **Egalitarian (active father) narrative.**

A similar number of men and women in the sample, most of whom were childless, characterized themselves as being in partnerships with a high degree of gender-egalitarian attitudes and behaviors. Men within this narrative were engaged in a very proactive discourse,

claiming their active fatherhood and their right to be part of all spheres of their child's development and daily life. Women also discussed their partners, and their relationships, as having a very gender-egalitarian dynamic. Most respondents and their partners held university degrees. In these cases, there was no preconception of which partner should do what, as the doing gender approach posits. These cases also lacked a bargain negotiation to determine the childcare implications on the partners' time or income, at least at the intentional stage.

Among this group, we observed that most of the sample had jobs in the arts, education or social sciences, and most of them expressed a high degree of satisfaction with their professional lives. These men had, or chose to have, jobs that allowed them to have flexible schedules and, consequently, a good work-family balance. In fact, two of them already worked part time, while three more had the flexibility of being self-employed and working from home, which allowed them to establish their own schedules. Pablo was one of these men. When he and his partner had their daughter, they reduced their working hours considerably to spend as much time as possible with their child until she went to daycare. When Pablo was asked about his intentions concerning unpaid leave for a second child, he stated,

I would... We would like to do the same, but then, it depends on whether the circumstances facilitate it or not. With the first child, it was possible, and we searched for the conditions to make it happen. I loved it. But now, we do not see each other with a second kid because I don't think we can do the same now.

(33 years old, father of a 2-year-old child, self-employed illustrator)

Pablo truly enjoyed the involvement with his daughter during her first year, but it meant intensity, full attention, and some income reduction that would not be easily replicable for the second child. We found Federico's case to be similar. He affirmed that he and his partner would ideally prefer to take full-time leave so as not to miss any of their child's development.

Nevertheless, Federico was aware that the ability to take such leave could ultimately depend on



the jobs he and his partner had at the time they became parents. Pablo and Federico illustrate the importance of the institutional dimension—labor-market institutions and family policies—in shaping the future behavior of using part-time unpaid parental leave. Their narratives suggest that their behavior might ultimately be determined by their ability to achieve work-family balance without experiencing significant material deprivation.

**Egalitarian (passive father) narrative.**

While we identified these men and women as having egalitarian attitudes and behaviors, men in these narratives act from a *passive* position. In other words, these men seemed to know that gender equality is a moral imperative, but this egalitarianism did not come naturally to them. The men recognized that their partners occupied a leading position in the logistics and decision-making of the household and felt pressured to perform tasks in an egalitarian fashion. The men were far from claiming active fatherhood as the *egalitarian (active father)* group but still expressed their intention and their partners' intention to reduce their working hours after having a child. Half of these respondents were already parents. Guillermo is one of them:

No, I don't think I would stop working for such a long time [full-time unpaid parental leave], but yes, I would take my fifteen days [paid paternity leave] and a reduction in working hours. I don't know now for how long, but I know for sure I would take it. I would take it easy, and I especially want to spend more time with my child, so the workload does not all fall on my wife.

(35 years old, father of a 5-year-old child, insurance company, permanent contract)

In most of these cases, unemployment was present (for men and women equally). The *passive* nature of these men's narratives could suggest that the circumstances of unemployment pushed them towards more egalitarian behaviors and a positive intention to take unpaid leave with the arrival of a child, which is consistent with previous research (Deutsch, 1999; Holter, 2007). Women (except one) did have university degrees and, apparently, had better career

prospects. However, despite these men having post-secondary education, only one held a university degree. In addition, these men had more technical positions in the labor market and felt less fulfilled by their jobs, meaning that either the type of job or the working conditions were not as good as they would wish. Some respondents had a certain degree of job flexibility due to self-employment or working in the public sector.

The narrative of the *passive* men could suggest that even without a proactive gender-egalitarian attitude, their unemployment situation or their higher flexibility at work than that of their partners plays a role in the couple's negotiation of childcare strategies. Still far from the theoretical perspective of doing gender, these couples seem to discuss their intended use of leave based on their relative time availability rather than following a strong ideational commitment to gender egalitarianism as presented by the *egalitarian (active father)* narrative.

### **Narratives with the Gender-Specialization Strategy**

As noted in Table 1, the gender-specialization strategy is the most common strategy in our sample, as more than half of respondents reported it. In this strategy, men do not plan to use unpaid leave, while women do. There are slightly more parents in this group than childless respondents. We distinguish among the following three different narratives that suggest interesting gender differences: *conservative*, *men's flexible job*, and *women's disappointment*.

#### **Conservative narrative.**

Almost a third of the whole sample revealed traditional gender-role attitudes in their narratives. This group included more women than men and more parents than childless respondents. We found interesting differences arising depending on the sex of the interviewee. The men in this category—who were approximately equally divided between childless and

already a parent—believed that mothers are better caregivers than fathers and tended to justify their unequal division of labor by relying on a biological discourse and arguing that since they cannot breastfeed a baby, they are less necessary during early childhood. A detailed approach to this kind of reasoning can be found in Seiz et al. (2016). Some men in this group were aware of the uneven division of labor and reported some type of intra-couple conflict. They either openly recognized that they disliked doing housework tasks or justified themselves by claiming that they lacked time because of their long working hours. A number of them, including those who were self-employed, worked more than 50 hours per week. For men in the *egalitarian (active father)* narrative, being self-employed was considered an opportunity to flexibly balance work and family, but self-employed men in the *conservative* group considered their jobs extremely demanding, not allowing them to spend more time at home. It was mostly in this group that some men reported their partners' desire to take full-time leave if they could afford it.

Among women within the *conservative* narrative, we need to distinguish between two slightly different reasonings. First, a small group consistently articulated a belief in gender-role specialization and preferred to take full-time leave for themselves if they could afford it. However, the second group of women in the conservative narrative showed a certain degree of frustration regarding their inability to encourage their partners to become more involved in childcare. These women tended to believe that, if mothers work, they should work part time in order to combine their work and family duties, and a few of them mentioned that mothers are better caregivers than fathers. These were respondents in couples whose division of labor resembled Hochschild's (1989) “second shift” experience of women who, while participating in the labor market, were also in charge of most of the housework (and childcare). Almost all mothers referred to daily arguments at home regarding housework distribution, and some

mothers indicated that gender inequality had considerably increased with the arrival of their first child. However, they used the "help" discourse (e.g., "he does not help me," "I wish he would help me more")—a sign of their assumption that housework is, in some sense, a female responsibility. The mothers expected their partners to "help" them but took for granted their main role as primary caregivers. As González et al. (2013) also reported, these Spanish women tend to "monopolize childcare" by supervising any childcare task in which their partner might engage. Pamela, one of the women showing frustration, did not expect her partner to reduce his working hours if they became parents.

Pamela: I think men do not change their work; the one who gives up something is always us, women. I think it is true. I think that now, in his current job, he maybe could cut off certain responsibilities, so he could have some more free time, but I do not know....  
(27 years old, childless woman, part-time beautician, permanent contract)

The *conservative* narrative represents the doing gender approach in which the partners have a preconception regarding their gender roles. Men act as the main economic provider, whereas women act as the main housekeeper and caregiver with little or no negotiation in terms of their intended use of parental leave. The men in this group hold greater *bargaining power* based on their more demanding jobs. Even while expressing disappointment regarding the lack of involvement of their partners, the female respondents still assume their main role as caregivers.

### **Men's flexible job narrative.**

The second gender-specialized narrative corresponds to mostly men (except for one) who explicitly argued that they did not need to reduce their working hours due to their high degree of flexibility at work, which allowed them to spend time on childcare when necessary. All these men held a university degree and had relatively good jobs in which they reported being satisfied

and having flexibility in their working hours. Their partners had a weaker labor-market position in common: they worked part-time, were unemployed, or were students. Alejandro, for example, represents this narrative.

Interviewer: If you had a child, would you reduce your working hours?

Alejandro: No, I wouldn't. No, because I already have a relatively good working schedule, and, in addition, I work very close to home, then I could ... [manage it]. Yes, I don't think I would ask for it. Well, for sure not!

Interviewer: And what about your partner?

Alejandro: I think she will ask for reduced hours, if she can, and if we can afford it. I think so.

(29 years old, childless man, full-time high-school teacher, temporary contract)

The weaker occupational position of the women in these couples might explain the economic necessity of assigning the responsibility of household income to the men by not taking part-time unpaid parental leave. The gender dynamics (i.e., housework and childcare) among these couples ranged from fairly egalitarian to fairly conservative based on the respondents' gender-role attitudes and reported division of labor at home. Among these couples, we conclude that the partners' relative resources were key in determining the rationale of their childcare arrangement decision-making regardless of their gender-role attitudes.

### **Disappointed women narrative.**

The third narrative within the gender-specialized group belongs entirely to women. Similar to some women in the *conservative* narrative, these respondents explicitly expressed their disappointment regarding the unequal distribution of household (and childcare) responsibilities, even though these women had *passive* egalitarian partners.

Even though reporting a gender-specialized childcare arrangement, these women hold a similar narrative as the one found among *passive* egalitarian men: household chores are

relatively equally shared, but under primarily female management. It is significant that, while men in relationships with this gender dynamic reported positive intentions of taking part-time unpaid parental leave (*egalitarian (passive father) narrative*), women seemed to be less optimistic about their partners, which is consistent with the previous literature on perceptions of gender equity within the couple (Kamo, 2000).

All women in this group had university degrees, but not all their partners did. Nevertheless, these couples were characterized by having good job positions and a stable economic situation; sometimes men and women worked more than 40 hours/week. Women in this narrative had solid gender-egalitarian beliefs and seemed to have pushed their partners into a more egalitarian division of housework given that they were full-time dual-earner couples. However, these women did not expect their partners to adjust their working schedules to parenthood.

The *egalitarian (passive father) narrative* and *disappointed women with passive partner narrative* show the two gender views. In both groups, the household gender dynamics are egalitarian, and the women tend to have higher human capital, i.e., education and work prospects, than the men. However, according to the males' perspective, the childcare experience will be equally shared by reducing both their working hours, while according to the females' perspective, the men will not reduce their working hours. Therefore, we interpret that, in these cases in which resources are similar or the woman supposedly has more bargaining power, doing gender prevails.

## Narratives with the Pro-Work Strategy

### Pro-work narrative.

The last narrative belongs to a small group of interviewees who consider it unnecessary for either of the parents to take unpaid leave. These interviewees positioned themselves as very gender-egalitarian in their attitudes and behaviors. Both partners held university degrees. Moreover, the majority of women also held PhDs. These couples worked full-time and reported little job flexibility. However, interviewees were confident that they would be able to manage their work-family balance once they became parents. One example is Raul. Raul believed that he and his partner would keep working full-time while taking their children to daycare directly after finishing the paid parental leave. However, this childcare arrangement requires work-schedule flexibility.

Raul: I will have to balance my work and personal life in a very different way [in terms of schedules]... Fortunately, I have job flexibility ... and I can do an intensive work schedule, but it will also depend on my partner's job.... I think we can manage it, both working full-time. Both sitting down and thinking carefully how to do it. It will also depend on whether or not your company facilitates it; some of them do it, but others don't.... It will depend on the employer's willingness.

(31 years old, childless man, full-time researcher, temporary contract)

The *pro-work* narrative is derived mainly from childless couples in which both partners are very career oriented. Their reasoning is far from the *doing gender* perspective, but apparently also far from the *relative resources*' argument, since none of them plans to reduce their working hours.

## Conclusion

This paper explored parents' and prospective parents' intended use of part-time unpaid parental leave through an analysis of 52 in-depth interviews with highly educated men and women in stable partnerships in Spain. We aimed to better understand the reasoning explaining why individuals intend (or not) to take part-time unpaid parental leave by categorizing and comparing the narratives and couple characteristics of the interviewed men and women. We also aimed to disentangle how doing gender and relative resources theories apply and interact in each suggested narrative.

We developed three research questions based on the theoretical framework. Our first research question states whether or not couples in which both partners hold a positive intention to take unpaid leave include men who are highly committed to gender egalitarianism and women with higher resources in the labor market. According to our results, these two conditions—committed men and highly positioned women—occurred, but not always in the same couples. The analysis shows that men hold a proactive discourse towards performing and active fatherhood and, consequently, intend to take a part-time unpaid parental leave only in *egalitarian (active father)* couples. However, not all men who are willing to take part-time leave do so *by choice*; some men take such leave *by necessity* under the bargaining rules of the relative resources perspective when their partners have better career prospects or a less-flexible schedule.

Our second research questions wondered whether couples in which men are not planning to take part-time unpaid leave while their partner are hold more traditional gender-role attitudes and include men who have greater bargaining power than the women. This was partially true under our analysis. The *conservative* narrative represents the doing gender perspective. However, as we demonstrate, the narratives of some men who do not plan to take part-time unpaid parental



leave cannot be understood from the doing gender perspective. Some men (*men's flexible job narrative*) hold very gender-egalitarian values, but the relatively weaker position of their partners in the labor market drives their decision-making regarding parental leave, especially in times of economic crisis and regardless of their gender-role attitudes.

Finally, our third research question focused on whether couples in which no partner is planning to take part-time unpaid leave would hold gender-egalitarian attitudes and would have partners with similar resources. This is indeed what our interviews reflect. The *pro-work* narrative represents those men and women who are highly committed to their work and careers. For them, the lack of gender-traditional attitudes and their similar resources explain their part-time parental leave use intentions.

Overall, we conclude that the narratives regarding part-time unpaid parental leave use reflect the partners' gender-role attitudes and their relative resources, interconnected in a complex manner. Many respondents highlighted that the ultimate decision underlying their current intentions would be determined by both partners' labor-market circumstances when they had a child. Interestingly, our analysis also shows how gender-role attitudes influence individuals' reasoning. The men who represent the most proactive version of active fathers (*egalitarian (active father) narrative*) tend to prioritize their commitment to fatherhood and adapt their work careers based on this priority. For instance, while self-employment served as a work arrangement allowing these men to have the flexibility needed to balance work and family, for other men, self-employment indicates long working hours that would prevent them from being more involved in childcare (*conservative narrative*).

We make two important contributions with this study. First, by identifying individual narratives, we contribute to the understanding of the reasons underlying the decision-making

process. Thus, we embraced previous work conducted by Brinton and Lee (2016) and Knight and Brinton (2017), which also allowed us to move beyond the gender-role dichotomy of “egalitarian vs. traditional” and explored the different gradients existing between the two. We thus propose a categorization of six different narratives. Second, the advantage of asking men and women about their partners’ intentions enabled the identification of interesting gender patterns. By contrasting men’s and women’s voices regarding their intentions to take unpaid parental leave, we can conclude that the construction of their narratives diverged according to whom is asked. Consistent with previous studies (Kamo, 2000), men tend to overestimate the gender-egalitarianism level of the couple. As we demonstrate, men in our sample were more optimistic about taking part-time unpaid parental leave than women were about their partners.

Our research approach also has some flaws. First, asking about intentions could have resulted in unreliable responses due to the difference between intentions and behaviors. Some respondents’ working conditions may change by the time they become parents, which could lead them to modify their intentions. Second, by focusing only on highly educated individuals, we left outside the scope of the analysis those individuals who would presumably experience greater job constraints in taking unpaid parental leave. Future research will be essential to continue understanding attitudes towards family policies by individuals with lower human capital. Third, by relying on interviewees to explore their partners’ intentions, we ran the risk that they would not be fully aware of their partners’ willingness of taking leave. Separate interviews with both partners of the same couple would have benefited the gender comparison. However, the differences in their narratives provide an interesting starting point for future research. In this vein, follow-up interviews for this study are forthcoming and will allow intentions and behaviors to be contrasted. In addition, the extraordinary fast legislative changes advancing towards a non-

transferable gender-equal paid parental leave system in Spain by 2021 (Jurado-Guerrero and Bueno, 2019) open up a new and ample window for future research.

Our results confirm that the current Spanish parental leave policies are not enough to encourage fathers to take unpaid parental leave and advance towards greater gender egalitarianism. In light of the high levels of use of paid leave by men, not only in our sample but also based on aggregate data (Fernandez-Cornejo et al. 2018), a paid gender-neutral parental leave system would be key. Gender-neutral policies might reduce the gap between fatherhood attitudes and behaviors, increase gender equality in Spanish households, and build stronger father-child bonds. This could lead to the normalization of the notion of involved fathers while also reducing the stigma that some involved fathers experience today in their workplaces.

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