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Making use of work-family balance entitlements

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Introduction

Public perceptions of fathers and fatherhood are shifting (Featherstone 2009). The introduction of new family policies by the UK government (Golynker 2015) mirrors these changes, in recognition of a broadening role of UK fathers beyond that of mainly financial provider to also encompass the role of active caregiver (Caracciolo di Torella 2014; Henz 2017). However, overall progress toward more gender equality in parenting has been stalled in part by the lack of a movement to reshape men's work and family life in the same way that women's caring and employment responsibilities have been integrated (to a certain degree) into their lives and personhood (Gerson 2011; O'Brien 2013; Goldscheider *et al.* 2015).

Family-related leave and work-family balance policies are available to UK fathers in various formats: these include Paternity Leave, Parental Leave and Shared Parental Leave, in addition to the various forms of flexible working and other benefits such as childcare vouchers. We refer to the group of policies designed to enable parents to balance family life and employment as 'work-family balance' policies, adopting this descriptor from Hobson and Fahlén (2009:216). An enquiry into potential models of change; in this article we take a capabilities approach, which affords us the perspective that fathers are somehow not fully enabled to use policies, rather than assuming that fathers are not interested in looking after their children per se. The focus on both institutional or meso and individual or micro level factors central to the capabilities approach helps us to analyse how fathers in one organisation develop a sense of entitlement to care, rooted in the culture of the organisation but activated by the agency of the individual. Our findings suggest that at least some fathers are very much interested in actively looking after their children. We seek to explore and potentially contribute to evidence that despite policy changes towards a parity of entitlement

between mothers and fathers other employer-related factors are holding fathers back from being more actively involved as primary carers (Golynker 2015).

To try and find out how fathers feel they could be supported in their work environment to make better use of work-family balance policies, we conducted a case study of a large-scale, public-sector organisation in Scotland. This organisation has a large employee population of fathers and many work-family balance policies in place which go beyond the statutory. It has a reputation to uphold as an ethical and fair employer, so can be considered as a critical case study in the sense that it would be expected to be a more supportive employer than most with regard to work-family balance policies. Specifically, focus groups with fathers were used to explore the relationships between workplace culture and practices and investigate the main factors influencing fathers' decisions to use work-family balance policies and how they felt about using them.

Organisations stand to benefit from supporting work-life balance among employed parents (Amstad *et al.* 2011; Burnett *et al.* 2012). Reasons for employer support for working parents, both mothers and fathers, draw upon both the work-family conflict and work-family enrichment hypotheses, which point to a win-win situation of happy family members being productive employees, and vice versa (Amstad *et al.* 2011; Shockley and Singla 2011). Also, work-life balance support can be seen as a fringe benefit (non-monetary reward), which can be used as a device by employers to attract and retain their top talent (e.g. Eriksson and Kristensen 2014).

Our study contributes to knowledge of how fathers with access to workplace support might use it (or not) to combine employment and caregiving. The purpose of this case study is two-fold: 1) to contribute empirically on an under-researched area in Scotland and in the UK and to offer directions for further exploration and 2) to explore

models of change to support working fathers in taking an active role in the care of their child, moving away from a paradigm of working fathers as a homogenous 'career focused' group of 'providers'.

Workplace support for fathers in the UK

Across the UK, since April 2015, employed fathers and mothers (and same-sex partners) are entitled to the same duration of statutory leave, but most of the leave is not an individual entitlement and so must be shared between the parents.[1] As such, mothers generally take most of the available leave. That leave which is most often taken by fathers is the 2 weeks Paternity Leave, sometimes supplemented by Annual Leave, soon after the birth of their child (Koslowski and Kadar-Satat 2018). Other statutory benefits include the right to request flexible working options, such as flexible working hours or part-time working (Golynker 2015). Employers have a legal duty to consider these requests and may only refuse them on clear business grounds. However, in practice, use of flexible working arrangements remains inconsistent and gendered (Wheatley 2015).

Organisations may enhance the pay, sometimes to a considerable extent, or extend the duration of the statutory leave entitlements (ILM 2014). This extra addition to statutory entitlements is especially important in the UK context, given the very low level of financial compensation below minimum wage (Koslowski and Kadar-Satat 2018). Family benefits may be included as part of the overall benefits package offered by an employer. Extra-statutory benefits related to Maternity Leave may still be more generous than extra-statutory benefits available to fathers.

Despite fathers and mothers having equivalent formal access to statutory work-family balance policies, fathers' take-up of work-family balance policies is much lower

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[1] See (O'Brien and Koslowski 2017) for a full review of entitlements.

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than that of mothers (Hobson and Fahlén 2009; Burnett *et al.* 2013; Wheatley 2015; O'Brien and Koslowski 2017). Whilst most UK fathers take some leave immediately after the birth of their child, they then return to work shortly afterwards. We are keen to explore how fathers are feeling about this gendered parenting practice, whether it is ideally what they would have wanted, and whether their employers could have made it easier for them to use more of the available work-family balance entitlements.

Miller (2010; 2011) and Ives (2014) have explored the impact that the return to full-time work soon after a child's birth can have on fathers and families. Resisting a move from 'caring for' to 'caring about' their children can prove difficult as fathers become (even) less involved with daily childcare, returning to a role primarily defined by their financial provision. Fathers can experience feelings of alienation and exclusion exacerbated by their return to work (Ives 2014). This loss of connection with family and the caring role, instigated by the return to full-time work, could impact on the likelihood for fathers to use work-family balance policies throughout their child's young life (Evertsson *et al.* 2015). UK and international evidence demonstrates the impact of work-family balance policies in facilitating fathers to spend more time with their children in a caregiving role (Tanaka and Waldfogel 2007; Haas and Hwang, 2008; O'Brien 2009). But, this is predicated on fathers actually using the policies.

Much as the mother role, the father role can be seen as floundering between competing expectations. A father might feel he is being expected to be both a competent financial provider and at the same time want to be a more 'hands on dad' at a time when gendered attitudes to parenting are shifting. In addition, the macro-economic context means that the expectations placed on workplaces and individuals are such that even if parents want to share care equally in line with their ideals, it would seem to be a very

difficult aim to achieve when the primary concern is to hold on to employment and not risk making extra demands on an employer (Gerson 2011).

At the same time, increased utilisation of work-family balance policy by fathers is a desired aim (e.g. Scottish Government 2012). Fathers' involvement in caregiving is seen to offer multiple benefits for children, fathers and families, including improved educational attainment and more positive mental health outcomes for children (Pleck and Masciadrelli 2004; Flouri 2005); more stable and harmonious couple relationships for parents (Pleck and Masciadrelli, 2004; Evertsson *et al.* 2015) and increased stability of employment and job satisfaction for fathers (Allen *et al.* 2000).

The capabilities approach applied to parenting: institutional conversion factors

A number of well-established theoretical frameworks are potentially available to help us better understand gender inequalities in parenting practices. Sen's capabilities approach provides one such lens and is perhaps particularly well suited to the conundrum of why fathers do not make use of the work-family balance policies theoretically available to them, given the assumption that it is not simply the case that they do not want to spend the time looking after their children. Sen's approach has been developed and is best known in relation to the different field of poverty studies, but it is effectively appropriated by scholars for use as a framework for understanding the gendered dimensions of work-family balance policies (e.g. Hobson 2013).

Applying Sen's capabilities approach provides a framework for articulating how entitlement to work-family balance policies might be transformed into capability (Sen 1992; Hobson and Fahlén 2009; Hobson 2013). A capabilities approach focuses not only on actions but also on possibilities, on an individual's opportunities – or agency - for both doing and being (Sen 1992; Hobson 2013). Capabilities refer to the capability

of functioning in activities which '*expand the opportunities of what you can do and who you can be*' (Hobson 2013: 4). As such, this analytical framework helps us to identify an agency gap between how fathers (and mothers) might want their work-family balance to be and how it often is.

Our approach helps to highlight that even seemingly non-gendered entitlements remain gendered (e.g. Brandth and Kvande 2009) in that mothers and fathers require a different set of 'institutional conversion factors' to actually use them. Analysing practice can only demonstrate how fathers operate within the existing policy structure, and sheds no light on their ideals, aims and aspirations for fathering. When comparing individualised and gender-neutral leave schemes, Brandth and Kvande (2009:184) found that use of the gender-neutral scheme was 'influenced by the encounter with the gendered society and reflects the prevailing gender patterns.' Evidence from our focus groups throws into relief that whilst most 'formal' policy is gender neutral, the organisational structure in which the policy is embedded is populated by gendered workplace norms and expectations which support mothers to take a more active role than fathers in childrearing on their return to the workplace. As Acker (1990:140) notes, 'the gender segregation of work, including divisions between paid and unpaid work, is partly created through organizational practices'. For fathers, taking time away from work for childcare requires a distinct exercising of individualised agency and still constitutes 'exceptional' behaviour as mothers are ascribed primary caregiver status with the many disadvantaging effects that this has on their workplace outcomes, as discussed by Ridgeway and Correll (2004). We are interested in how to support and encourage fathers to take more leave and models of change for this process. We argue that low take-up of leave does not signify the absence of a desire for involved fatherhood in men. By identifying factors which seem to enable or constrain fathers to

take up leave in this organisation, we can start to build a model of change, suggesting that if these factors were present in organisations, the formal entitlements held for fathers are more likely to be 'converted' into actual use of entitlements.

Conversion factors can transform resources, in this case, work-family entitlements, into agency and capabilities for work-family balance (Hobson 2013). Hobson and Fahlén (2009) cite a number of conversion factors in their analysis of the gender imbalance in utilisation of work-family balance policies, which resonate with the broader literature. Financial concerns are key for fathers with regard to leave due to the low statutory payments, so extra-statutory 'top up' might be considered relevant. Also, the possible stigma of flexible working or part-time working, as representing a lack of commitment to the employer and organisation and thus risk of redundancy and/or non-promotion, is also a barrier to work-family balance policy use for fathers and may thus need to be addressed (Brandth and Kvande 2001; Hochschild 2001; Williams *et al.* 2013).

In this paper, we look specifically at the organisational 'institutional' factors (rather than individual or societal factors) present in the workplace which impact on fathers' ability to access work-family balance policies. Four major themes emerge in the relevant literature: the influence of line managers; peer relationships; and workplace culture, in part expressed through gendered leave practices (Hochschild 2001; Bygren and Duvander 2006; Den Dulk 2011). This is echoed by Burnett *et al.*'s (2013) study on the invisibility of men as fathers in the workplace:

> '…three key contexts appeared to render employed men's paternity invisible, or
> 'ghostly', within their employing organizations… these can be understood in terms
> of the role of line managers; the gender disparity between how men and women are
> perceived to be treated; and the impact of peer relations.' (Burnett et al. 2013: 640)

Whilst policies and entitlements formally exist, there is clearly an agency gap with regard to fathers using them. We use the conceptual lens of institutional conversion factors to analyse the implementation of work-family balance in one large public sector organisation in the UK. This approach acknowledges that individuals operate within a world of institutions and our prospects depend on the institutions which exist and how they function (Hobson 2013), an assertion which necessitates the consideration of institutional factors on the process of exercising individual agency:

'*one's ability to even contemplate a change in quality of life is embedded in institutional setting'* (Hobson and Fahlén 2009: 35).

The existing evidence from the UK suggests fathers' values are aligned with engaged and active fatherhood, but their intentions seem to crumble after their baby is born (Miller 2010; Ives 2014). We use the capability approach to explore the extent to which the employer plays a part in this situation, despite formally offering the same or similar workplace support to both mothers and fathers.

Data and methods

To further understand how fathers might feel supported by an employer in being active caregivers for their children, we designed a critical case study within one large-scale public sector organisation. Focus groups were chosen as the data collection method: 4 focus group sessions guided by a semi-structured schedule, were conducted by the same interviewer with a total of 13 participants in June 2015. Focus groups were selected to capture the daily interactions between and about fathers in the workplace. Kitzinger (2005) suggests that focus groups within existing peer networks reveal daily interactions such as teasing, joking, arguing and anecdotal conversation which other data collection methods such as individual interviews may be unable to capture. These processes give insight into how the experiences of individuals are articulated, changed and censored

through interaction and how this relates to the formation of group norms (Kitzinger 2005). The focus groups specifically targeted close-knit teams to examine the impact of peer-to-peer transmission of ideas and shared organisational values, and included by design employees with highly variable educational background working in similar roles and at similar salary points.

In the case study organisation, fathers' entitlements could be said to be advanced in the UK context. In addition to the statutory entitlements (including 5.6 weeks paid Annual Leave), fathers received 2 weeks' Paternity Leave at full pay (a considerable top up on the statutory amount) and paid time off to attend ante-natal appointments. A range of flexible working options were also available to employees. The option to work flexibly seemed well-integrated into the model of the organisation, whether through a fixed arrangement of compressed hours, for example compressing 5 days' work into 4 days per week or working a 'nine-day fortnight' or through building up 'flexi-time' which can be accrued and then used as time off as and when needed. Other flexible work options such as working from home or working non-standard office hours, for example from 7am to 3pm, were also utilised when required and were celebrated for the flexibility they offer to working parents. Recent changes to the working requirements at the organisation meant that core hours of work, which used to require attendance in office between 10am and 4pm, had been relaxed, and so employees were even more able to fit their work hours around their family commitments.

One overriding theme from the data, supporting our choice in using this organisation for our critical case study, is that most if not all of the fathers felt that the organisation, in general, was actively supporting fathers, and doing this more effectively than other organisations they had previously worked for:

'Actually, this is the best employer that I've ever had, because I've worked at
places that don't accommodate you at all, and actually I just thought I'd say - aye,
there's always things you can do, you can always ask for more, everybody is going
to do that, but from my point of view, this organisation is doing a really good job,
and have supported me as a dad to my kids, and I appreciate that'. (Participant D)

To be eligible, all participants had to meet the conditions of living and working
in Scotland (one of the nations of the United Kingdom), having at least one child under
five years and being part of a dual income couple where their wife or partner[2] also
worked or was planning a return to work after Maternity Leave. The call for participants
was extended via the weekly e-newsletter to all staff and shared on the staff intranet.
The article described the research purpose and what would be involved in taking part in
the research, and opened the invitation to any fathers working within the organisation
who met the above criteria. Follow up was not needed as all 4 focus groups sessions
were filled within a short time. All eligible willing participants took part, there was no
further selection process.

The fathers who took part reflected variety in age, occupational status, income
level, education and length of employment with the organisation. Fathers' age at first
birth ranged from 26 to 41 years, mean age at first birth was 32. Income levels ranged
from £22,034 to £62,000+ per annum. The range of educational levels ran from
Standard Grade (school exams taken aged 16) to PhD, with time spent at the
organisation ranging from under 1 year to 25 years. Figures detailing this information
are attached (Appendix A). 7 out of 10 participants had worked for the organisation for
between 10 and 25 years, many since the beginning of their career. Participants
explained that most people move around within the organisation rather than leaving,
causing frequent shifts in work teams and line management. Due to self-selection bias,

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[2] All participants were in heterosexual relationships.

the fathers who took part were all interested in and enthused about the topic and not necessarily typical of all fathers in the organisation. Several participants marked themselves out amongst their work colleagues by self-identifying as more 'touchy feely' or emotional, modern, non-traditional or progressive than others. The findings of this small qualitative study can only be said to be indicative of a small and specific subsection of the workforce of fathers, whilst still contributing to an under-researched area.

The focus groups were held at the employees' place of work over their lunch hour. Groups took between 70 and 105 minutes and were made up of three or four fathers at each session. The focus group schedule was developed in consultation with practitioners at Fathers Network Scotland and the gatekeeper institutional contact, and designed to gather data on both the reality of practice in the workplace and the individual and institutional ideals behind this reality. Questions covered current practices, knowledge and use of work-family balance policies, influences on the decision to take leave or work flexibly, and what the workplace could do to improve work life balance for fathers (for the full focus group schedule see Appendix B). A condition of access to the organisation was the presence of a policy manager in the focus group sessions, who acted as gate-keeper for the research. The policy manager was senior to most of the participants in the focus groups, and had directly managed several participants, and we anticipated an impact on participants' contributions. A female researcher interviewed the male participants and we considered the possible impact on data collection. Williams and Heikes (1993) report that although gender can impact upon the frankness of contributions from male participants, it does not adversely affect the directness of the data to a compromising extent, and this was also our experience.

Findings and Analysis

The focus groups followed a semi-structured schedule, informed by the literature but which left room for other themes not anticipated by the research team to also arise. Transcripts of the focus groups were thematically analysed, identifying four major themes and several more themes not tied so closely to the research question. The four most prominent themes are presented below: general workplace culture, support by colleagues, support by line managers and gender practices in the organisation.[3] It quickly became clear that the organisation offered full pay rather than only statutory pay for the two weeks Paternity Leave. Participants generally felt that the organisation supported fathers more effectively than most public-sector workplaces and certainly more than the private sector. Participants recognised that their employer was more supportive than most, but also asserted that ideally, they would be able to access further support.

From unthinkable to totally acceptable: fathers' self-described work-family balance practices and workplace culture

Initial questions on the current practice within the organisation revealed the influential role of workplace norms in making certain behaviours totally acceptable and others unthinkable. Phrases such as 'normal', 'necessary' or 'essential' were common in the way fathers talked about these behaviours. Confronting these norms was part of the

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[3] Other themes that arose but which were not further developed in the analysis included: lack of affordable childcare and the heavy financial burden of childcare costs, even for very high earners; the role of mothers as gatekeepers in encouraging (or not) fathers to be involved in childcare; fathers' lack of social networks with other parents in comparison to mothers; and the career penalty feared as a result of taking time away from work to care for children.

process of forming an identity as a father in the workplace, and our participants revealed to us how these norms are '*woven into the patterns of lived lives: how they inhibit or enhance a sense of entitlement to make claims for a WFB*' (Hobson and Fahlén 2009: 229).

Within the organisation, taking two weeks of Paternity Leave was considered 'necessary' and viewed as standard practice by participants; as was augmenting their statutory entitlement to Paternity Leave with paid Annual Leave:

> 'I work in the [ ] Division, there it's perceived as normal to take time off. When she was born, I took two weeks Paternity Leave plus four further weeks. Annual Leave, flexi leave, so that was fine.' (Participant L)

Indeed, all the fathers we spoke with had taken their full entitlement to two weeks Paternity Leave at full pay, and most had taken Annual Leave to further extend this period. Clearly, fathers value their Paternity Leave provision very highly, and consider it absolutely 'essential':

> 'You want to take it off. You're never getting that time back. You never get any time back with your kids, but those first weeks are so important; I needed to get as much as possible.' (Participant B)

In general, the fathers felt that two weeks was not enough time to fully meet their families' needs at the time shortly after the birth. Asked why he had extended his leave period, one participant replied:

> 'I think that it is necessity more than anything, because you know, if you take it, it's only one or two weeks, but in both cases, I took three weeks because I felt that was the minimum that I needed to be able to support.' (Participant G)

Despite an awareness that more time would be helpful, using other forms of leave, such as unpaid Parental Leave, or utilising the new Shared Parental Leave, was

roundly rejected as unfeasible on financial grounds. There was a wide variation of income amongst participants, however, this did not seem to affect attitudes towards unpaid or low paid leave; the idea of taking unpaid or low paid leave was felt to be unrealistic. This is in alignment with current research on public attitudes to Shared Parental Leave (BIS 2015).

It would appear that in the case study organisation, the two weeks leave, plus some weeks of annual leave, had become standard practice widely supported by line managers, but extending much beyond this was not part of the culture. Beyond two weeks of leave, the participants experienced a feeling of 'abusing' the system and pushing their luck; when they asked to use their entitlements they often felt as though they were asking for a favour.

Support and use of entitlements by colleagues

Ambivalence and uncertainty were common emotions amongst fathers using flexitime or compressed hours to care for their children. Fathers repeatedly described feeling guilty when using their leave entitlements or working flexible hours:

> 'When I take a flexi-day off to watch my kids as I did last week because my folks were away, I tend to check my Blackberry or if I've got a laptop, I'll switch the laptop on and check some emails and things like that. Because I almost feel, because I'm taking the time off to watch my kids, it's almost like a 'fake' reason to take time off. Yet, before I had kids, I go and play a game of golf and not think twice about it because it was almost like that was my time, I'd earned that time, I'm taking a day off to go and play golf. All that stuff, I've earned it, but for some reason, I almost feel guilt at taking time off to go and be with my kids, and feel that I need to actually check in with the office.' (Participant C)

Overall, the consensus was that the organisation are very supportive employers and that colleagues were generally highly supportive of fathers' making use of work-

family balance policies in order to look after their children, and yet this sense of guilt persisted.

The normalisation of flexible working through its extension to all workers seems to have indirectly supported parents and working fathers in particular; as we heard above, some workers had become acclimatised to flexible working for leisure activities before they had children. The fact that the nature of the organisation attracted and promoted the positive work-life balance agenda, which is the topic of this study was a matter for discussion. Several participants drew attention to the contrasts between attitudes in the public and private sector:

> 'My brother works for a private organisation. I think you get a feeling that their families are kind of seen by a lot of people as 'add-ons' to their real life of work. Whereas here you do have a feeling that people actually realize that we come to work for our families not the other way round." (Participant C)

However, when they had changed their working pattern to accommodate their family, some participants had experienced the resentment of other colleagues who were not using work-family balance policies:

> "I think people - specifically around children - the default is, "does that mean I'm going to get screwed with an extra load of work, because you're disappearing now?" When you have to do that you're inconveniencing someone as a result of it, and I guess that's a lot of peoples' default, which is understandable." (Participant F)

Although this negative viewpoint was not perceived as commonplace, several members of staff mentioned the importance of leading by example when it comes to work-family balance. One senior manager commented that as one of the few high-level male staff working 4 days per week, he felt a responsibility to "model" progressive behaviour.

"I feel quite conscious about having been promoted and then saying "the first thing that goes out the window is your family-friendly policy"… I think it's just something about using my experience to promote it a little bit as well." (Participant F)

Across the various hierarchical levels of the organisation, there was a perceived lack of exemplars for newly introduced work-family balance policies, specifically leave to attend ante-natal appointments and Shared Parental Leave. Fathers described how the leave practices of their peers brought the use of new entitlements into the realm of possibility, in this case discussing extending their Paternity Leave using paid Annual Leave:

"When you start to see practical examples of people who are actually doing it and then you think, "Actually, I could have done that.". If I'd had the opportunity I maybe would have done. Certainly if I'd seen them doing it before I might have then done it." (Participant A)

The importance of exemplars in enabling employees to use their leave entitlements signals that the presence of behavioural modelling of the prioritisation of work-family balance by peers could be a significant conversion factor.

"It depends on your boss": the line manager lottery.

Fathers were asked whether a supportive line manager would make a difference to the likelihood that they would feel comfortable using an entitlement. Although Paternity Leave and pay was accepted as standard, the use of other forms of leave, other than Annual Leave, did not seem to be so straightforward to access. The precariousness of work-family balance entitlements due to many policies being administrated through line managers' discretion meant that fathers experienced anxiety at being required to initiate discussions about work-family balance policies and renegotiate their flexible working

requirements with each new line manager, with the necessity of repeatedly explaining their family circumstances.

The role of the line manager in negotiating any request for flexible working options or discretionary leave was identified as key by all four focus groups. The below conversation is representative of the interactions between fathers when they were asked about the factors which helped or hindered them to feel confident in using their entitlements:

> Participant D: "For me it's the line manager who's probably the most important one, even though there is a policy, if someone is unapproachable, or you have to reiterate the policy to them you feel awkward, whereas if someone is more accommodating it's a lot easier […] So that would be the most important one for me."

> Participant F: "Yeah, I agree. I think the moment you start that conversation and you-, someone is rolling their eyes or just...it makes it all really difficult and really awkward. […] The fact that it was made so easy, it just wasn't an issue, it's just helped immeasurably."

> Participant E: "Yeah, as long as you feel comfortable approaching your line manager to take time off, then the rest of it's pretty straight forward."

The role of the line manager in recognising and supporting the needs of the employee is so important that employees would rather have a shorter leave period with line manager support than a far longer period without the support of their manager. The most important aspect of line managers' support was their recognition of the importance of employee's families for their engagement at work. Understanding the motivations of fathers had also helped several participants to manage fathers on their own teams more effectively.

Meaning making: gendered practices in a gender-neutral policy environment

Gender specific practices were both extremely evident with regard to duration of leave and also more subtly in evidence at the organisation. Participants raised the way that on a mother's return to work after Maternity Leave, it was almost expected that she would move to part-time hours, in keeping with the biases evoked by the motherhood role as discussed by Ridgeway and Correll (2004). However, this was not the case for fathers, who negotiated a landscape of uncertainty but also exercised more discretion as to the extent to which they made their fatherhood visible:

> "I definitely do feel there's a slight difference for fathers taking time off, than for mums. I mean, at one point, I talked about doing compressed hours. Partly actually because I wanted to spend a day a week with the kids. […] I kind of raised that and I wasn't told, "No, you absolutely cannot do that" but I just talked to a couple of people about it, and it wasn't just a line management thing, it was just a bit of advice. But you definitely got the feeling like, "Well, is that really want you want for your career? Being about on certain days is quite important. If you're not there somebody else will have to pick that up." You start to get that feeling like...nobody's saying definitely they would, kind of like, hold you back but, nobody's saying the opposite..." (Participant C)

Individualised negotiations put fathers under pressure to simultaneously assert the legitimacy of their caring role and protect their career. Brandth and Kvande (2001: 265) found that in Norway, standardised, collective measures are significantly more effective than flexible measures at promoting father involvement for employees. Self-censorship cuts across all identified conversion factors – the flexibility stigma prevents more than informal conversation with colleagues to test the water. The strength of feeling about this 'flexibility stigma' (Coltrane *et al.* 2013) varied across the different groups, and was mainly discussed in conjunction with the disadvantages this gendered pattern of work-family balance practice could create for female workers.

As much as these practices were problematic for mothers, the participants also felt that they created barriers for involved fathers. Whilst participants reported that colleagues and work culture were supportive, they also responded that in the workplace "*Fathers seem to be forgotten about as responsible parents*" (Participant J). One specific issue was highlighted: emergency childcare:

> "There's an automatic expectation that my wife will take time off because she's the mother. But actually it's more difficult for her because she's a teacher, rather than me taking a bit of time off because we've got a bit more flexibility, and maybe not got any meetings, etc. There's almost like this societal thing I think, that won't go away." (Participant C)

The persistent expectation for mothers (in these examples those beyond the organisation) to take time off to care for sick children was reiterated across the focus groups, and especially problematic as many participants' partners worked in less flexible roles for other employers. This highlighted how the gendered practices with one employer might interact with those with another employer.

In sum, whilst the policies offered by the organisation were not formally gendered (apart from the Paternity Leave), the way they are used by employees was extremely gendered.

Discussion

Continuing Hobson and Fahlen's (2009) utilisation of Sen's capabilities and agency framework of analysis we have applied the concept of institutional conversion factors in our empirical analysis. Institutional conversion factors are those aspects of the employment situation, which can be said to transform the knowledge of entitlement to work-family balance policies into the utilisation of those policies; from policy to practice. The feeling of something being standard practice – a workplace norm - seemed

to be key for take up in the case study organisation. Within this arena of standard practice, four central factors were identified as the main supportive or undermining elements in the fathers' take-up of work-life balance policies: the role of the line manager in supporting or undermining the employee's desire to use the policies, the support of colleagues, the workplace culture in general, and gendered practices within the organisation.

The workplace culture of our case study organisation is in general explicitly supportive of work-family balance and aware that employees have lives outside of work. This is not only expressed through formal policies but through the attitudes of colleagues and management across the organisation. Many of the research participants reported being drawn to work at the organisation as they felt it was aligned with their values of equality and social justice. As employees of the organisation, they now felt a responsibility to 'walk the walk' and express these values through their own behaviour. However, despite this, we still found extremely gendered practice in how employees make use of this workplace support.

The findings of our study suggest the importance of peers' behaviour in relation to leave is recognised by the participant fathers at the case study organisation, both in the way it can influence their own decisions, but also in the importance of demonstrating a positive attitude to work-family balance policies when in a leadership or managerial role. Participants recognised the actions undertaken by the organisation and identified the support they received at work as both unusual in a general work context and also highly helpful to them as parents and as workers, and yet the gendered practice still arguably makes it more difficult for fathers to combine employment and caregiving than is the case for mothers. Also, the invisibility of fathers at work was

found to be more possible than for mothers, in keeping with other literature (Burnett *et al* 2013).

In general, participants felt that line managers were supportive and empathetic when dealing with Paternity Leave, Annual Leave and flexible working requests. Problems arose when fathers came to negotiating entitlements less often used by fathers, like the provision of 'special' leave, for non-emergency family situations or parenting leave beyond the 2-week Paternity Leave. Even though the participants were aware that these entitlements were available and they were eligible for them, having to initiate negotiations left them feeling as if they were asking for a favour from their line-manager. Notions of having to build up goodwill and trust demonstrate the focus on autonomy for the employee in determining their own work-family balance arrangements, rather than them being able to rely on an organisational standard practice or norm. At the study organisation, the desire for further formalisation of policies to shift the responsibility for negotiating work-family balance entitlements from individual to organisation-level reflected a preference for further intervention to support them within this particular group of fathers.

Within the case study organisation, there is little evidence of direct gender discrimination against fathers in relation to work-family balance policies. Instead, a subtler understanding of the social meanings ascribed to different practices is present. For example, the gender balance between men and women on types of flexible working would suggest that many fewer men than women work part-time or partake in job shares. Avoiding the correlated loss of income, flexible working for men seems to focus more on flexible or compressed hours rather than reduced hours. Gendered practices, such as expecting mothers to be the first point of contact in emergencies despite information to the contrary, seemed ingrained. Through the experiences of our

participants, we can observe the reproduction of gendered work-family balance practices in the study organisation (Acker 1990).

Another possible conversion factor for the some of the fathers at the case study organisation may be the relatively secure and long-standing nature of their employment; 7 out of 10 of participants have been employed at the organisation for over 10 years. Many entered with school level qualifications and have spent the majority of their working lives with the organisation. Depending on the individual, some may feel that the investment the organisation has made in them cements their value as an employee and gives them leverage to negotiate for their preferred work-family balance arrangements, in the absence of more collectivised arrangements, which would be even more effective (Brandth and Kvande 2001). The egalitarian ethos and policies of the organisation would preclude directly preferential treatment for some staff, but the employee's own understanding of the workplace culture may impact on their own agency and capability to request work-family balance entitlements, in line with Hobson's application of Sen's capabilities approach (2013).

Our paper contributes to recent research from the UK, which suggests that new fathers may be directly or indirectly discouraged by employers to prioritise childcare (Miller 2010; 2011; Burnett *et al.* 2013; Ives 2014). At this time of role change, fathers' intentions for their caring role may be side-lined or subverted by statutory provision which many find inadequate, and which delivers ideological messages about the nature of and the importance of their role. As Miller argues, the cultural shift toward the caring and nurturing father, the active co-parent, has found foothold in large swathes of UK fathers, and as (predominantly) middle-class professionals employed in the public sector, the research participants of our study are likely to be amongst them. However, it arguably remains difficult, even in the relatively progressive environment of our case

study organisation, for parents with gender equal attitudes to act on their values with authenticity and parent in line with their beliefs when their child arrives.

We found that taking a capabilities approach facilitated an enquiry not only into practice but also into ideals, aims and aspirations for fathering. There is an agency gap between how fathers utilise entitlements and their desires to be active caregivers, even in a seemingly father-friendly organisation. By identifying institutional conversion factors such as having a supportive line manager and modelling by senior managers, we can potentially start to build a model of change, which could ultimately lead to new, less gendered practices with regard to take up of work-family balance entitlement.

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Appendix A: Description of sample of fathers

Appendix B: Focus Group Schedule

Focus Group Schedule

(1) How do you arrange childcare at the moment?

(2) How do you think it is perceived when fathers take time off work for family related reasons?

(3) How aware are you of the different leave entitlements, which are available? (Paternity, Shared Parental, Parental Leave)

(4) Thinking back to when your children were born, what time off did you take from work? Did you feel that you benefitted from that time? If so, how?

(5) Thinking back to that time, in an ideal world, how would things have been for you in regard to Paternity/Parental Leave?

(6) Which has more influence on your childcare-related decisions; workplace culture or leave provision?

(7) Is it important to work full-time and fixed hours? If it were financially viable would you consider working part-time? How about flexible working?

(8) If you could make one change in your work to allow you to father the way you want to, what would it be?