

Designing parental leave for fathers – promoting gender equality in working life

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for fathers

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to analyze the Norwegian parental leave policy for fathers, the father's quota, which has reached a mature age of 26 years, asking how gender equality has been affected in working life.

Design/methodology/approach – Based on interviews with 28 fathers who have used the father's quota, the paper analyzes the connection between leave design, its use and impacts by using the design elements of individualization, generosity and non-transferability.

Findings – Findings show that in granting fathers an individual, earmarked and non-transferable right, the welfare state has contributed to turning leave taking into a norm for modern fathering. The generosity in terms of length and full wage compensation strengthens it as a right in working life. Fathers being paid their full wages for staying at home taking care of their child emphasize the dual-carer norm. The analyses show that the collision between fatherhood and the ideal of the unencumbered employee has weakened in many types of organizations.

Originality/value – The paper addresses the request put forward by Lewis and Stumbitz (2017) and Moss and Deven (2015) where they state that there has been little research addressing how parental leave is implemented in working life.

Keywords Design, Fathers, Gender equality, Working life, Parental leave, Father's quota

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The work and welfare model in Nordic countries includes policies that support working mothers and fathers through an extensive parental leave system combined with high-quality day-care for children (Brandth *et al.*, 2017). This reflects the dominant parenting norm of dual earners and dual carers (Gornick and Meyers, 2009), a norm promoted by welfare state researchers as a key to achieve gender equality (Pascall, 2012). The Nordic countries have acted as pioneers of several gender equality incentives in parental leave schemes (Haas and Rostgaard, 2011). This includes granting fathers parental leave rights. The father's quota, which is an individual, earmarked, non-transferable right for fathers, represents a core component of the leave system in four of the Nordic countries.

Few elements of international social policy have drawn such continuous attention as parental leave policies (McKay and Doucet, 2010). Many countries are in the process of introducing policies in this field, while other nations are continuing to develop existing policy (Moss and Deven, 2015). Providing an overview of policies in 43 countries, the annual report of the International Network of Leave Policies and Research (Blum *et al.*, 2018) shows great variety in policy design and eligibility. In looking back on policy developments in leave policies Moss and Deven (2015) find a growing attention to fathers and designing policies intended to increase men's active involvement in childrearing through increased use of leave. These include father's quotas, which are well paid, fathers' only entitlements, and bonuses that give families more leave if parents share the leave. This recent focus is still in very early stages in the majority of countries. This paper analyzes the Norwegian parental leave policy for fathers, the father's quota, which has reached a mature



stage of 26 years, asking how gender equality has been affected in working life. The aspect of gender equality examined in this paper is how fathers' parental leave use has affected the ideal worker norm.

Based on the annual report of the International Network of Leave Policies and Research, Haas and Hwang (2019) recently assembled the national overviews of leave policies in Europe. They point out that fathers have been given the right to take parental leave in 30 of the 31 European countries included in the review, but that the rights vary widely. For instance, in 19 of these countries, fathers are granted an individual right to leave, but only 6 of them offer well-paid leave for fathers (at 2/3 or more of salary). Used data show that in only four countries do more than 75 per cent of fathers take the individual leave. Norway is one of the four countries (together with Sweden and Iceland from northern Europe). Thus, being a relatively rare case compared to other countries, the Norwegian situation is an interesting case to look into.

Brighthouse and Wright (2008) sort the various leave systems into three types according to their gender equality outcomes: first, some types of leave arrangements tend to reinforce traditional gender roles, as they preserve women's role as mothers, for example, maternity leave, unpaid leave and cash allowances. Second, policies may also enable equality, such as shared parental leave. Such policies may enable equal sharing within families, but they put no pressures on fathers to use them. Third, a third type of leave policies promotes equality, which is needed in order to achieve "strong gender equality". Leave granted to individuals rather than families, where the leave lapses if it is not used is an example of this type of leave. Brighthouse and Wright (2008) find the latter type of leave necessary for breaking down the cultural barriers to gender equality in family and working life. The leave, however, must, be of a certain length. The shorter paternity leaves offer fathers a bit of extra time to assist the mother after birth, but a few days off work is no opportunity for sharing care responsibilities. The father's quota being an individual, earmarked, non-transferable leave fits many of these requirements (Kvande and Brandth, 2017).

By comparing fathers' uptake of individualized leave for fathers with other forms of leave, such as entitlements to families Moss and Deven (2015) conclude that well paid, father-only leave is the direction to be taken if gender equality is to be obtained. When looking forward to the next 10 years asking what policy and research topics to focus on, they return to their book title from 1999 – *Parental Leave: Progress or Pitfall?*. They find that too many leave policy designs still will have the effect of reproducing traditional roles of caring instead of encouraging a development towards dual caring and dual earning (Moss and Deven, 2015, p. 141). According to Morgan (2008), the father's quota represents greater equity in terms of the dual-earner/dual caregiver model compared to other types of leave that only represents a "partial reform".

A study of what prevents men from taking parental leave in Canada (McKay and Doucet, 2010) points to four factors: the preferences of mothers, no earmarking of the leave, too short leave and the social norms at the workplace. According to Matzke and Ostner (2010), family policy in European welfare states is increasingly focussing on the norm of individualization, indicating a policy that treats women and men as individual workers especially when gender issues are discussed. In order to capture variations and change in family policies, Daly (2011) suggests applying the concept of "individualization processes" which implies a shift away from policy assumptions based on the male-breadwinner/female-carer model and instead expecting all adults to be both breadwinners and carers. When analyzing variations in social policy she suggests incorporating two dimensions: the treatment of people as individuals or as family members for the purpose of social rights, and second the treatment of gender equality. Gender equality being a separate point is important, as individualistic policy designs do not necessarily include gender equality (Hobson, 2004). In this paper we are addressing the request put forward by Ray *et al.* (2010), in which they point out that

surprisingly little research has been carried out that links the design of parental leave policies to their outcome. There are especially few empirical studies assessing how parental leave schemes that are gender egalitarian by design function in work organizations.

The use of the Norwegian father's quota over the years shows that it has been successful as a measure to get fathers to take parental leave. After the father's quota was introduced, there was a dramatic increase in the proportion of fathers who took leave the following years, from 4 per cent in 1993 to 85 per cent in 2000 (Brandth and Kvande, 2013). Over the past decade, the take-up rate has stabilized at the 90 per cent plus level (Halrynjo and Kitterød, 2016; Naz, 2010). This paper will take as its point of departure the individualization process that has taken place in the design of the parental leave schemes. Based on the long experience with increasing father's individual rights to parental leave through a "father's quotas" system in Norway, the paper will analyze how this works in order to promote gender equality in working life.

The interaction of welfare state policies and working life

According to Liebig and Oechsle (2017), work organizations are important contexts for studying possible changes towards dual earning and dual caring among parents. How parental leave is implemented in working life has received little attention by researchers (Lewis and Stumbitz, 2017; Moss and Deven, 2015). In general research on how to increase father involvement in childcare has often pointed to work organizations representing barriers against change in fathering practices. Discussing fathers' use of policies promoting shared childcare Haas and Hwang (2019) suggest that barriers to fathers' leave taking in general are deeply embedded in workplace culture. They emphasize that a dramatic change to the concept of the male ideal worker is needed in order to create more equality between fathers and mothers in this field.

This relates to a long research tradition pointing to terms such as "worker", "leader" or "manager" being abstract constructions until filled with people (Adkins, 1995). This is also why a worker is understood as just a worker, without acknowledging for instance that a worker is often also a parent. The abstract workers are without commitments and obligations that might disrupt their concentration on work, thus constructing ideas about the ideal worker (Acker, 1990). These ideas about the abstract worker without bodies conceal the gendered impact of the apparently gender neutral processes that take place in work organizations. This is why the introduction of an earmarked, non-transferable quota for fathers in the Norwegian parental leave system represents a potential rupture with the disembodied, abstract, ideal worker (Kvande, 2005). The quota has an explicit focus on embodying male employees as fathers by giving them leave from work.

Lewis and Stumbitz (2017) raise the question of how research can contribute to identify conditions of shifts in workplaces leading to involved fatherhood reminding us that it is important to take into account the wider institutional contexts that parental leave systems are part of. The book *Work-Family Dynamics* (Brandth *et al.*, 2017) demonstrates how the institutions of welfare state, work organizations and family with their respective logics of regulation, economy and morals confront each other differently according to time and place. Illustrating the economy logics, a study from the USA finds that men who request family leave are penalized and given a poor worker stigma (Rudman and Mecher, 2013). According to Gerson (2017), the institutions of work and care are still built on a traditional male-breadwinner norm in the USA. She underscores this by pointing to the fact that the USA is the only country with no federal government programme to provide employees with paid parental leave. In addition, a new ideal worker norm has emerged in the USA (Williams, 2010) that places the job before all other commitments. According to Blair-Loy and Williams (2017), this is why so many managerial men maintain an even increase in their long work hours. Other studies also report how the economic logics of work privilege men who have

few care responsibilities and long working hours (Miller, 2017; Kaufman, 2017). In the Nordic countries, several studies show that workplaces may not represent particularly serious hindrances. Haas and Hwang (2009) hold that corporate support for fathers taking parental leave has increased in Swedish companies, and attribute this to the larger supportive cultural environment and institutions in which the companies are embedded. Finnish studies also find positive attitudes towards men taking parental leave in work organizations (Lammi-Taskula, 2007; Närvi and Salmi, 2019) as very few fathers get negative reactions when taking leave. The same is found in studies from Norway emphasizing that the workplace level has little negative effect on parental leave taking (Halrynjo and Kitterød, 2016; Lappegård, 2012; Naz, 2010; Hagen, 2017).

Based on the registered data of fathers' leave taking in the 1990s, Naz (2010) finds that fathers' type of workplace had no effect on their use of the quota; it only affected their use of shared parental leave. Naz argues that the non-transferability of the quota has made it into a norm. In Hagen's (2017) study private sector employers in different industries and branches were interviewed. Her findings demonstrate that employers accommodate the leave of their employees and that, like Brandth and Kvande (2019a) found, employees adapt to company needs related to for instance periods of extra workloads. Also, Nordberg (2019) explores how managers accommodate employees' leave rights. Her findings show that managers do not necessarily perceive parental leave as a problem, but the practical solutions they propose to possible challenges show gendered norms, although these norms play out differently within the different organizations.

In the Norwegian context, it is important to consider the institutional importance of the special working life model which has developed with a focus on collaboration between employer and employee (Bungum *et al.*, 2015). Based on mutual recognition of rights and obligations, the employees have the opportunity to influence their working conditions. Employee rights are anchored in legislation and policies that limit the influence of the employer. This has led to a high level of trust between the parties in working life.

In order to understand why fathers in the Nordic countries encounter different reactions than those found in the larger literature, this paper will explore how working life and welfare state interact by asking: How do the design elements of parental leave for fathers work in order to promote gender equality in working life; How is the traditional ideal worker norm affected?

Data and method

The analysis is based on two qualitative studies of fathers' parental leave use. In the first study 40 interviews were carried out in late 2012/early 2013. For the analysis in this paper, we have singled out 19 in which the fathers had higher education at the masters' and PhD level. This is in order to increase the probability of finding fathers with high commitment work/ideal worker norms. The interviews were carried out during the second year after the child's birth. The fathers in the sample had right to 10 and 12 weeks of individual leave and 27 or 26 weeks of shared leave if they chose 100 per cent wage compensation.

The fathers were recruited by contact with various workplaces and then snowballing. Eight of the 19 interviewees in the study had immigrant backgrounds. Despite all having higher education, they worked in a wide range of occupations in private as well public organizations, including engineering, graduate engineering, university teaching, research and medicine. They worked in organizations of various sizes and compositions. All the fathers had full time positions, and all of them lived together with the mother and the child. Most mothers were also employed full time.

The second study was carried out in the autumn of 2016 and winter of 2017 (Moen, 2017; Moen *et al.*, 2019). It consisted of interviews with nine fathers in management positions who had taken parental leave in terms of the father's quota of 10 or 12 weeks. Compared to the first study, their children were a bit older at the time of the interview, but young enough for

the fathers to be able to remember in relative detail the toddler period and how they experienced the leave. All the fathers in this study worked in private engineering companies and were recruited according to the snowball method. All were middle managers in their companies, either as heads of sections or department. Their duties in these positions could include human resource management, project management and team leadership. The main topics of the interviews concerned work duties, job satisfaction, the leave itself, combination of work and home, caregiving responsibilities including a detailed description of “an ordinary day” at home and at work.

In both studies interviews were semi-structured and lasted between 1 and 2 h. To preserve anonymity, the full name and contact details of the interviewees were not recorded, and fictitious names have been used. The fathers were generally interviewed in their homes, but some interviews took place in a café or at their office. Their understandings were based on both what they had observed and what they experienced themselves. Transcripts were first examined to identify themes in the ways that fathers related to the design elements of the father’s quota. Several themes connected with the parental leave literature emerged in this descriptive stage. While focussing on clear themes, we also paid attention to the variable views of the fathers. In the next stage of analysis, we interpreted these themes in light of changes in the ideal worker norm. The findings are illustrated by quotations.

The sample has been purposely selected in order to increase the probability that the fathers were influenced by ideal worker norms at their workplaces and yet had confronted these norms by using the entire quota. Thus, the analysis cannot be representative for groups of fathers beyond this sample. For instance, interviews with fathers who had not higher education, had not used the quota or taken it as part-time with the mother at home, might produce different results. Our goal has been to produce knowledge about a particular constellation of norms: ideal worker and involved father.

Norwegian parental leave policy for fathers

The Norwegian statutory parental leave scheme is an earnings-related social insurance programme in which parents “earn” the right through participation in working life. In this way, family policies are closely connected to employment policies. One general objective of parental leave policies in Norway is the equal sharing of paid and unpaid work, which is encouraged by the leave system, which demands that both parents work in order to acquire rights to paid parental leave.

As seen from Table I, parental leave consists of three parts: for the mother, for the father and one part that can be taken by either the mother or father (shared part). There has been a strengthening of the individually targeted leave rights – the father’s and the mother’s quota – at the expense of the sharable part, which was gradually reduced. In 1978, the parental leave system moved away from maternity leave and introduced shared parental leave. This signalled a new perspective on father’s responsibilities in caregiving. During the years following the introduction of shared parental leave, the fathers seldom used it. This was the background for introducing an earmarked, non-transferable leave for fathers in 1993. The total leave period was extended at the same time.

When analyzing the development of the design elements in the Norwegian parental leave system, the gender equality scale elements suggested by Gornick and Meyers (2009) are used. These are: individualization, generosity and non-transferability.

Father’s individual right to access and use of the parental leave

An independent right for fathers to the shared part the parental leave system was introduced in 2000 (Ot.prp.nr.52, 1999–2000). Earlier fathers were dependant on mother’s rights to parental leave in order for fathers to be entitled to share the leave. This implied that she had to be in the workforce for at least six of the last ten months before the birth of the child. The fathers’ quota

Table I.Development of paid
leave 1909–2019
(number of weeks)

Total No. of weeks	Before birth	Maternity leave/mother's quota	Shared parental leave ^a	Father's quota	Daddy days
1909:6		6			
1915:8		6			
1946:12		12			
1978:18		6	12		2 ^b
1987:20		6	14		2
1988:22		6	16		2
1989:24/30 ^a		6	18/22 ^a		2
1990:28/35		6	22/29		2
1991:32/40	2	6	24/32		2
1993:42/52	3	6	29/39	4	2
2005:43/53	3	6	29/39	5	2
2006:44/54	3	6	29/39	6	2
2009:46/56	3	6	27/37	10	2
2011:47/57	3	6	26/36	12	2
2013:49/59	3	14	18/28	14	2
2014:49/59	3	10	26/36	10	2
2018:49/59	3	15	18/28	15	2
2019:49/59	3	15/19 ^a	16/18	15/19 ^a	2

Notes: ^a80 per cent (instead of 100 per cent) wage compensation increases the leave length; ^bpaid by the employer after collective agreements

was introduced in 1993, and Norway was the first country to include this type of quota as part of the parental leave system (Ot.prp.nr.13, 1992–1993). To begin with, the fathers' quota was a derived right, based on mother's participating at least 50 per cent in the working life. The reason for this was the promotion of mothers' participation in working life. For fathers to be able to use the father's quota, mothers must still have been in the workforce for at least six months before the birth of their child (Prop. 80 L., 2009–2010). If the mother does not go back to work or education after being home on parental leave, the father cannot use any of the shared weeks of the parental leave. The "activity claim" is just applied to mothers not fathers.

Earmarking and non-transferability as individualization

When the father's quota was introduced in 1993 an explicit political aim to strengthen the father–child relation, but also as a consequence of this, to change the gendered work division with respect to caring for small children. In order to strengthen the individual right, the father's quota was made non-transferable to the mother. If the father does not use it, it is forfeited. With the father's quota, an additional rationale emerged – the child's need for a caring father (Report to Parliament no. 4, 1988–1989, p. 32).

The earmarking and non-transferability design element that has been politically contested in disputes about gender equality and political choice (Ellingsæter, 2012), and over the years, various Norwegian governments have increased as well as reduced its length. An expert committee appointed by the conservative government produced a white paper in 2017 (NOU, 2017:6) suggesting a period of six months leave to each parent, which cannot be transferred to the other parent. This can be seen as the ultimate gender equal design of parental leave which is just beginning to be discussed in the political parties.

Generosity length and wage compensation

Norway's parental leave scheme is extensive, with a total of 49 weeks that are 100 per cent paid with public compensation, or 59 weeks with 80 per cent pay. Wage compensation is up to a ceiling of approximately EUR 62,705 per year (2015). For fathers with earnings above

this level, employers, primarily in public and large private companies, as a rule pay the difference between the wages and what the state compensates for. As shown in Table I, the father's quota was increased several times and it is now 15 weeks (from 1 July 2018). During the period from 2005 until 2013, two social democratic governments increased the number of weeks from five to 14 weeks. This reform led to a new design of the parental leave, because of the introduction of mothers' quota of 14 weeks.

In 2014, a Conservative government came into power, and their plan was to do away with the fathers' quota. Because of a very heated public discussion and significant resistance to this plan, the government decided to reduce the number of weeks gradually. Hence, the fathers' quota was reduced to ten weeks. During the four-year period of the conservative government, the number of weeks fathers used of the parental leave was reduced accordingly. This was the reason why a second Conservative government in 2018 decided to reverse the cancelation, and increase the quota to 15 weeks.

In addition to these design elements, the father's quota has been made more flexible. Part-time leave combined with part-time work is one type of flexibility. Another type of flexibility is deferred leave, which means that the leave weeks can be distributed over a period of three years. Fathers can also choose whether they want to use the quota while the mother is at home or after she has gone back to work. These elements may increase fathers' usage, but not their competence as caregivers (Brandth and Kvande, 2016).

Normalization of male employees as caring fathers in working life

Because the father's quota has existed for over 20 years in Norway, it is well known, and as stated in the introduction the great majority of Norwegian fathers use the quota. It has been a widely used practice for Norwegian fathers from the early days of the father's quota. The Norwegian experience with a special fathers' quota is that taking leave has become a norm for what men do when they become fathers (Halrynjo and Kitterød, 2016; Naz, 2010). Using interview data with fathers from our research projects this section focusses on how working life and welfare state policies interact. We explore how the design elements of the parental leave for fathers work in order to promote gender equality in working life.

Employers playing by the rules

The fathers in our study are aware that the design of the leave is important for their use of it. A statutory father's quota given to all eligible fathers is perceived as being of particular importance. The universalistic nature of the quota stands in contrast to rights given by the work organizations, which would lead to different leave rights between fathers. In addition, the father's quota is a tax-financed legal right given by the welfare state to fathers in working life. The fathers in the study give a particular focus to the quota being based in law regulations. One of them explained how he assessed the father's quota being a state regulation: if the man must take it or leave it, then it is very difficult for your employer to say, "No, you cannot take it". Johannes recognized that the quota being a welfare state regulation secured the right of fathers to take parental leave. He saw the advantage of having a "pre-negotiated" right, in which the father did not have to negotiate with the employer, but which was decided by a third party; the welfare state. The fact that the leave is paid by the welfare state strengthens it as a right in working life. The fathers reflected on how the statutory universalistic principle created respect in working life. It is a right that is connected to being an employee and a father, and not something they obtain by individual negotiations with their employers.

The employees use the father's quota when they become fathers seems to be expected and accepted by the fathers and by the employers. A schoolteacher who took 12 weeks father's quota, said, when we asked about the reactions at his workplace: "It was expected! It had been more of an issue if I hadn't taken it". He called this practice "playing by the rules".

Very few of the fathers reported that they had experienced any problems at their workplaces which can be understood by the acceptance of regulations in Norwegian working life. One of the fathers, working as a finance broker, pointed out: "The father's quota is something you have to make use of, in order to bond with your child". This was based on his experiences with his first child. His workplace had been very positive to him using his ten weeks of leave. When the interview took place he had just started to work in a new company and he was expecting his second child. He was also planning to use his father's quota with his second child, pointing out that this was normal practice at his new workplace.

Fathers seem to take it for granted that working life adapts to the regulations of the welfare state. Martin, who worked in a bank, told about how he organized the leave taking with his manager "I didn't discuss much with him. I just said what I wanted, and he said ok". Referring to the fact that the father's quota has existed for many years the fathers illustrated the normalization process of father's leave taking that has taken place. A doctor working at one of the large hospitals talked about how leave taking has become what he labels "a part of life", meaning that working life adjusts to laws and regulations. By calling fathers' leave taking a "part of life", he illustrated the change that has taken place in Norwegian society concerning fathers' caretaking. It has become the "normal" thing to do for fathers. Daniel, who worked as Research Scientist in a private company, confirmed this, saying: "In my job everybody has full understanding – I felt that my colleagues supported it. I feel that there is total acceptance for taking leave and staying at home with children".

A senior advisor in the county administration illustrates how this normalization process also leads to the construction of the dual-carer norm. He says: "Why shouldn't we manage to adapt to fathers taking their quota of 12 weeks? Workplaces have managed to adapt work to the fact that mothers are home for one year [on parental leave]". He answers the question by stating that "it is just a question of planning and organizing". This is a very significant illustration of the change that has taken place. He deconstructs the ideal worker norm by comparing working mothers' and fathers' caring responsibilities and insisting that work organizations should adapt to their leave taking. The worker becomes embodied and constructed as a potential parent with caring commitments. New practices appear with normative implications for the ideal worker norm.

Experiencing long, well-paid leaves

In their discussion of incentives for men's take-up of parental leave rights, Ray *et al.* (2010) and Brighthouse and Wright (2008) focus on the importance of generosity in terms of length and wage compensation. Fathers in this study have experienced a relatively long period of leave, which gave them the opportunity to focus on being a caregiver for their child. Harald one of the fathers who had 12 weeks father's quota, explained: "This obviously helped me to get to know my child very well, and I could not have done that in the evenings or on the weekends. It was me and her". The relationship between father and child has been strengthened by using the father's quota due to having a long period alone with the child. This illustrates the importance of the duration element not just for father's take up, but also for his experiences while staying home on leave. The fathers could stay at home looking after their babies while they receive the same amount of money as when they are in the workplace. Arne also had a long leave of nine months, consisting of the father's quota plus six months of shared parental leave. He was new in his job when taking this long leave. In spite of this he did not receive any negative reactions.

As explained earlier parents get a total of 49 weeks that are fully compensated for. If you choose to have 80 per cent pay, the length of the leave period is extended accordingly. One of the migrant fathers commented on this: "You can take leave for almost a year (the total length of the leave) with 100% of your pay. You stay home for a year, don't have to think about

money, 100 focus on the children, [...] Everything is set up for you. That's so nice". Since his wages are fully compensated for in the parental leave system, it is possible for him to stay at home and look after his baby without losing economically because the parental leave system provides both time and money. In particular, he pointed to the full pay coverage for an entire year. He underscores the importance of the long parental leave with full pay, and he also mentions the day-care coverage, which ensured that as a family they would "have a good life", as he put it. The effect is that both parents can be earners and carers.

Empowered as carer

The earmarking and non-transferable element has an important empowering effect on fathers as caregivers. It signals that fathers are considered as important carers for their babies. This is also what the fathers staying home on leave alone experience. Through being home alone with the caregiving responsibilities they experience becoming "number one in the child's life" as Didrik, one of the fathers said. Because father's quota gives fathers the opportunity to have sole responsibility for their children and thus learn the everyday needs of the child. This results in the child learning to trust the fathers. Didrik pointed out that the father's quota was important for his relationship to both his children, and if it were not for the father's quota he would have continued to be "number two" in relation to his children. The fathers experiencing being loved and appreciated by the child reported a growth in confidence and self-esteem. This also illustrates how the father experiences the impact that the love and affection from the child might have.

Emil, who was Engineer and Head of Department, also chose to make himself unavailable for work during the weeks he used his father's quota. "During the leave, I didn't work at all, I didn't want them to rob me of the joy of the leave". He very deliberately made himself unavailable for his job. By doing this, he also calls attention to himself, as a father giving priority to caring for his child. It is interesting to note how Emil found that his daughter was just as dependent on him as she was on her mother during his use of the father's quota. He therefore believed that there was no great difference between the father's role and the mother's role, and that it simply came down to how much time one was willing to invest. His experiences suggest that if a father makes himself available and spends enough time with his child, he will tie as close bonds with the child as the mother does. This can be understood as the father's quota having contributed to increased equality between the mother and the father in the care work, through him being empowered as carer.

Markus also used the leave as a boundary setter because he was able to choose when he wanted to make himself available or inaccessible during the leave. The period of leave became a boundary setter for him in the sense that he chose to not accept work duties there and then: "[...]it felt good to be able to simply say 'no, I'm on leave, so you better come back in a couple of months', you know". Like Emil, he chose to make himself unavailable for work and available for caring.

Male managers as role models

Harald was one of the Managers in our study; he was Graduate Engineer and Head of Department where he worked. During his father's quota period, he chose to make himself inaccessible for his work, concentrating on taking care of his daughter. He had a long period of leave, which gave him the opportunity to focus on being a caregiver for his child. By doing this, he also risked being considered as uncommitted to his work. He showed that he gave priority to looking after his child. In doing this, he demonstrated that managers should also be able to use the father's quota. Karl, one of the Managers, reflected on the chance of being seen as an uncommitted employee, after staying home for 12 weeks using of the father's quota: I think it's quite good, both for the fathers and for the families, and maybe even for working life, really, I can be away and the business simply goes on anyway.

By making himself unavailable for the job, he discovered that the company managed without him. A long period with a fathers' quota helped Karl to see this.

This is also an example of the normalization process that has taken place in present working life. These managers belong to the second generation of leave users. Managers leaving the workplaces and staying home on leave looking after their babies is very significant illustration of the changing practices and norms in working places. Prior to taking leave many of these fathers considered themselves to be irreplaceable at work. Another Manager, Aron, also found that he was able to put aside his job during his leave: "I received the odd phone call which I answered, but there was nothing that was really a bother. I tried to be very aware of it, and I think I succeeded". His focus was on being a caregiver – even with a new managerial position waiting for him. Several of the fathers had a few phone calls from the workplace during their leave, but they spoke about them as being "pleasant", or not important.

The managers refer to their own experience from using the fathers' quota when their employees go in leave. They play an important part in defining the workplace norms concerning the employees' leave taking. Emil had his own negative experience in mind when assessing applications for leave from his employees. He stated: "There's one worker now who I'm the manager for and he's planning to take 26 weeks, that's half of the total leave time. Of course, he should be able to do this, that's the culture I want to have, that much tolerance". He used his experiences from his first leave where he received negative feedback from the company and did not want his employees to experience the same. Creating this type of culture was something Aron also wanted in the company where he worked: "There is acceptance for taking a large portion of the leave with no questions asked. We have people who take the minimum and people who have been away for seven or eight months. I think this is good, and I hope it's a stamp of quality for our workplace".

When analysing the experiences of male managers with being home on leave, we find that this has influenced their understanding of employees' caregiving responsibilities, creating a culture of acceptance. Their experiences of being home on leave have led them to encourage their colleagues and employees to use the leave, thus acting as role models.

Conclusions

Comparative international research has found that fathers in countries that offer earmarked, non-transferable leave have a higher take-up than in countries where such a leave design does not exist. The point of departure of his article has been the major change that has taken place in Norway when it comes to the participation of fathers in caregiving for young children. The father's quota which reserves part of the parental leave for the father has played an important role in this respect. In this paper, being interested in how leave policies work, we have approached leave use by studying fathers' actual perceptions of and experiences with taking leaves. From their perspectives, we have aimed to gain knowledge about the connection between leave design, its use and possible impacts. We have studied attitudes to fathers' leave use in working life and considered the consequences for gender equality in working life.

Focussing on the connection between policy design and leave use, we have endeavoured to understand the processes behind fathers' high take-up of the father's quota. The analyses show how the fathers have become aware of their individual right, and they regard the father's quota as their entitlement. Over time, in granting fathers this right the welfare state has contributed to turning leave taking into a norm for modern fathering practices. A statutory, earmarked and non-transferable right means that it is "pre-negotiated" by the state and this diminishes the need for negotiations with the workplaces where fathers' specific parental leave rights have become accepted and respected. The individual leave entitlement is also experienced as a motivating factor for most fathers to take care of their baby, and without the

“push” represented by earmarked, non-transferable leave some fathers would not have taken it. This is illustrated by the fact that the number of fathers who take the sharable part of the parental leave is much lower. They do not have the same sense of entitlement to this leave as to the father’s quota (Brandth and Kvande, 2019b). This point is also strengthened by the fact that fathers’ leave use was reduced when the quota went from 14 to 10 weeks in 2014. If the entire quota was made sharable fathers’ uptake would be reduced.

The analysis shows that the collision between fatherhood and the ideal of the unencumbered employee seem to have weakened in many types of organizations. Over time, workplace norms of acceptance have generated, and taking leave has become a standard practice. Many fathers of the first generation who took leave have made career advancements, and consequently today’s managers have used the father’s quota themselves. The analysis describes them as fathers who can accept being replaceable at work to be available for their children. If this means that the leave has strengthened employees as fathers to the extent that their fathering practices challenge the ideal worker norm, the father’s quota has demonstrated to possess a radical potential. Taking leave has not only constituted a challenge to masculinist workplace norms but also to the notion of men as ideal workers.

The study shows no stories of severe resistance from workplaces when wanting to take the quota. Workplaces respect parental leave policies and find ways to handle challenges and possible problems produced by employees on leave. On the national level, both employers’ associations and trade unions support the leave system, something which shows the advantages of the Norwegian working life model based on cooperation between employers and employees (Brandth and Kvande, 2019a). In return for the positive attitude of the workplaces, fathers who are about to take leave adapt their leave in various ways trying to avoid setting their workplaces in a tight spot. In this paper, the backdrop has been the dual-earner/dual-carer model that is an expression of the gender equality aim in the Nordic countries. Delimiting this theme to focus on fathers as dual carers, and we believe the observed change of fathers into more motivated and competent caregivers is one of the most radical contributions to this model. However, the father’s quota cannot alone bring about a new gender equality model. It has existed in a period where many other changes towards gender equality in family and working life have happened, such as laws on gender equality and the increase of women in workplaces. The interplay between these other trends and the father’ quota has magnified the speed and scale of the changes.

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