Why Most Swedish Fathers and Few French Fathers Use Paid Parental Leave: An Exploratory Qualitative Study of Parents

ANNA-LENA ALMQVIST
Mälardalen University, Sweden

Why fathers did or did not take paid parental leave and their leave practices were studied in two countries with very different policies and cultural contexts, namely France and Sweden. The couples’ income contributions and negotiations were assessed. Data were drawn from interviews completed in 1998 and 1999 with 20 French and 35 Swedish heterosexual couples who had at least one child below school-age living in the same household. The economic situation of the couple was an important reason in both nations as to why mothers used most or all of the leave. Evidence of negotiations about taking leave was expressed by Swedish fathers but not by French fathers. Swedish fathers expressed a child oriented masculinity, which is interpreted as representing modest change in hegemonic masculinity. In France, fathers’ taking parental leave was not considered an alternative among parents. This practice and their rhetoric suggest no change in hegemonic masculinity.

Keywords: fathers, mothers, masculinity, France, parental leave, Sweden

The similarities and differences in reasoning about paid parental leave and its use were studied in two countries with very different policies and cultural contexts, namely France and Sweden. To gain deeper insight into what influences people’s actions, it is
necessary to focus not only on macro-level factors but on behaviour of family members. Studies of the latter are not abundant, particularly studies using a comparative perspective (cf., Almqvist, 2005; Plantin, Månson & Kearney, 2003). To gain knowledge about the mechanisms that are decisive to understanding the gendered division of parental leave use between parents and why it varies by nation, the reasons for fathers’ care of young children must be studied. Thus, the focus of this study is primarily on fathers. The empirical findings are based on interviews with members of French and Swedish heterosexual couples who had at least one child aged six years old or younger living with them in the same household.

Masculinity and Fathers

How to act and react in social structures is based not only on class and gender stratification positions but also on further distinctions within each class and gender group. Among men a hierarchy exists that also helps determine their actions. To study gendered interaction men’s experiences should be placed in a structural context (Coltrane, 1994) with a focus on the hierarchy of masculinities (Sabo, 2001). Therefore, the way men choose or do not choose to use parental leave may relate to patterns of masculinities in their respective country. Connell’s (1995) notion of “hegemonic masculinity” at the top of a hierarchy of masculinities, has been widely applied to the study of gender order (Messner, 2001). The hierarchy is socially constructed. The pattern of dominant or hegemonic masculinity is often represented by a white, heterosexual man, personified as an icon in sports or politics and femininity is subordinated. But because masculinities are formed in relation to femininities it is important that research consider these two aspects, take a relational approach to gender and pay close attention to the practices of women (cf., Brod, 1994; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Connell (2003) argues that hegemonic masculinity is more an ideal or a vision that only a few men might enact but ordinary men can use this ideal to produce and reproduce an unequal gender order and thus, sustain women’s subordination. These ordinary men are enacting complicit masculinity according to Connell. Masculinity is not a fixed category embedded in the body but configurations of practices performed during social action. Therefore, masculine performances may differ according to the current gender relations in a given social setting. Hegemonic masculinity may work on different levels. Regional levels commonly but not necessarily influence the local levels. It may also be embedded in various social environments. The family is one form on the local level (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

The notion of hegemonic masculinity will be used to analyse the accounts of French and Swedish fathers. There is an ongoing discussion as to whether or not Swedish men’s changed rhetoric and behaviour is a real change away from hegemonic masculinity or just a modification of it (cf., Bekkengen, 2002; Plantin, Månson, & Kearney, 2003). One purpose of this study is to contribute to this discussion.
Parental Leave Regulations and Research

Besides perceptions of gender, parental leave regulations, cultural context on a societal level as well as the socio-economic conditions and values relating to the individual and the family are important factors affecting the division of parental leave. The main difference between the two nations was that parents during the major part of Swedish parental leave (föräldrapenning) were paid a generous proportion of their employed income, while French leave (Allocation Parental d’Éducation, or APE) was only paid to parents starting with the second child and the amount paid consisted of a fairly low lump sum. These differences reflect the regulations at the time of the interviews in 1998 and 1999 but changes have been made since then (CAF, 2007). Despite the fact that the APE was shareable between parents like most of the leave in Sweden, very few French fathers made use of it. In 1999, only 1% of the beneficiaries were fathers (AfSa, 1999, p. 414) and by 2003 men still only accounted for two percent of the beneficiaries. Swedish policy makers have for several decades been advocating the equal participation of fathers in childcare (Haas, 1992). To encourage fathers to make more use of paid parental leave and to put pressure on employers through legal enforcement, Sweden introduced a non-transferable daddy-month in 1995 that fathers must take or it will be lost. By 2005 father’s share of leave days taken increased to 19.5% (Försäkringskassan, 2006). A second, non-transferable daddy-month was introduced in 2002 to encourage fathers to take more time off with their children. In contrast, this big national divide does not occur for paternity leave. The majority of both French and Swedish fathers use the 3 and 10 days respectively of paternity days available after the birth of a child (Gregory & Milner, 2006).

The unequal gender distribution of parental leave has been attributed to several aspects including the fact that fathers often earn the most in a couple, as well as norms about who is the most suitable to take care of children. Boyer and Renouard (2003) found that unemployed workers and lower paid employees were over-represented among French fathers who make use of APE. In almost half of the families where fathers took leave the mothers’ occupations were at the upper end of the socio-professional scale and in 65% of these families the mothers had a higher educational level than their partner. In Sweden, both the mother’s and father’s earnings have had a positive impact on the father’s use of leave with father’s earnings having a greater impact than mother’s (cf., Sundström & Duvander, 2001). Bekkengen (2002) found that only in Swedish couples where the woman and the man share or plan to share the parental leave did negotiations take place. Members of other couples seem to have taken for granted that the parental leave was for the mother. Mothers’ dual-earner orientation has also been associated with a father’s increased likelihood of using parental leave in United States studies (cf., Seward, Yeatts, Zottarelli, & Fletcher, 2006). In summary, for a father, the use of parental leave is primarily his choice but for a mother, the use of parental leave is in practice basically decided at the moment she chooses parenthood.
Research Questions

The following three questions were posed in the study: How do fathers and mothers reason and act in relation to paid parental leave and what is the impact of the economic situation of the household? Are there differences in the way fathers and mothers negotiate about childcare? What does fathers’ behaviour in each country suggest regarding hegemonic masculinity?

Sample and Methods

Data were drawn from interviews of French and Swedish parents completed as part of the Welfare and Solidarity in Postindustrial Europe project (Abrahamson, Boje, & Greve, 2005). Parents in forty families in selected towns were interviewed in five different nations during 1998 and 1999. To be selected families had to contain at least one parent, have at least one child six years of age or younger, be using one or more forms of either public or private childcare and have one adult in the labour force. Of the 40 families interviewed in each town, 20 had to live in a low-income neighbourhood and 20 in a middle-income neighbourhood. Efforts were made to ensure that the selected families’ socio-economic profile and use of childcare resembled as far as possible typical families in their neighbourhoods.

The interviews analyzed were conducted in two towns, Umeå in the north of Sweden with around 100,000 inhabitants, and Nantes in the north-west of France with around 250,000 inhabitants. These towns were selected owing to their similar demographic structure and shared educational and labour market characteristics. Lists of names of parents willing to be interviewed were obtained with the assistance of preschool staff and childminders in both towns. Snowball sampling was used, asking other parents and childminders, to find single parents and parents currently or recently staying at home. Only interviews of couples, 35 Swedish and 20 French, were selected for analysis. None of the French fathers had used paid parental leave, whilst 23 of the Swedish fathers had done so. All Swedish fathers except three had taken leave in addition to the daddy-month. Of the French mothers, 18 had used paid parental leave, whilst all the Swedish mothers had done so. Also, Swedish mothers took the majority of available leave. Among both French and Swedish respondents, most fathers were working full-time. The French mothers were to a greater extent than Swedish mothers working part-time or were unemployed.

The interviews were semi structured. Responses to the following questions were the primary focus of the analysis. “Have you used paid parental leave?” If no, “Why?” If yes, “How did you divide the paid parental leave between you?” and “Why did you divide it in this way?” When possible, mothers and fathers were interviewed together. The interviews were taped and transcribed into French and Swedish and names were changed to maintain confidentiality.

The interviews were analysed according to the method that Kvale (1997) refers to as “categorisation of sentences.” Quotations were coded into categories. Long quota-
tions were assigned to several categories, which were specifically defined. These categories were often differentiated into subcategories. Hence, the categories or themes that emerged during the analysis are empirically grounded. The cited quotations for each theme were chosen to exemplify most clearly the lines of reasoning within the theme.

Findings

Similarities and differences were found in the way French and Swedish fathers and mothers reason and act in relation to paid parental leave (Almqvist, 2005). A brief summary of some of the themes found follows:

**Household economic situation, values and fatherhood.** The mother’s lower income, or lack of it, was cited by a large group of French and Swedish fathers and mothers, as being decisive for why the mother had used all or the major part of the parental leave. But different arguments were used when incomes were fairly similar. For example, take the French couple Amélie and Philippe, who both worked full-time and she used the APE. When asked what he thought about the parental leave system, Philippe commented, “Parental leave is fine. I think it’s fine for the first years. It’s good for the mother too, to be with her child the first year.”

Philippe articulated the traditional view that it is good for the mother and child to spend the child’s early years together. When income differences were not the case, motherhood was often put forward as a decisive factor. Philippe expressed a conservative masculinity, indicating that parental leave is only for the mother. Philippe’s reasoning and failure to take leave is in line with national data. Boyer and Renouard (2003) found that the men most likely to make use of the APE had partners with more senior professional positions while they had lower status positions. This was not the situation for Philippe and his wife.

Most Swedish couples, such as Marie and Olof, shared parental leave. Marie was working 80% of a full-time job and Olof was on parental leave with their second child at the time of the interview. For the first child, Marie took parental leave for a year and Olof for eight months. When asked why they had decided to arrange it the same way with the second child, Olof replied:

> Yes, it worked well before and then it’s really a fantastic privilege to be able to stay at home with your children and also being paid for it, so we use it. . . . The economic situation becomes worse during the time . . . but that you have to plan for. That’s why we have not bought a car because we could not afford that now.

Olof in rhetoric and practice was fulfilling some of the possibilities promised by proponents of the parental leave system. Olof’s responses exemplify the importance of the mother’s dual-earner orientation for the father’s use of leave (Seward et al., 2006) and
that the father’s use of paid parental leave increases with both his and her level of income (Sundström & Duvander, 2001). In summary, Philippe, like most of the other French fathers reasoned and acted according to conventional masculinity, emphasizing that childcare and parental leave is the mother’s arena. Olof, like most of the other Swedish fathers, exemplified a more child oriented masculinity.

**Fathers, mothers and negotiations.** Negotiations among couples were difficult to capture, both during the interviews and in the analysis. Available evidence suggests that Swedish fathers negotiated with mothers about taking leave whilst the French fathers did not. For example, take the Swedish couple Margareta and Anders. She was taking parental leave and he was working full-time at the time of the interview. Anders used about six months paid parental leave for the first son, divided into two leave periods. When Anders was asked why they had divided the leave in this way, he replied:

> I thought I should have the right to stay at home on leave, too, I should have a chance. I don’t know if it’s just psychology, but I thought that it was my child too. I should have the same privilege to stay at home.

Anders’ argument stressed the right to spend time with his child and suggested that negotiations had taken place between he and Margareta. Swedish men much more often expressed the importance of fathers’ engagement in parental leave and the everyday life of their children, when compared with the French men. No French man mentioned discussing with his partner his right to use paid parental leave. For them it was implicit that mothers should use the leave, as has been found elsewhere (Bekkengen, 2002). Responses from Sophie, a French mother, illustrate this. At the time of the interview, she had previously been in temporary employment, was currently claiming the APE and was married to Raoul, who was working full-time. Sophie commented:

> Yes, they don’t see their father much, I’m always with them. Their father has completely freed himself from these things. When he comes home, everything is ready. He plays with them. . . . We lead parallel lives. I don’t get holidays. When he is on holiday, he does other things . . . . I understand, but me, I still have the kids and no holiday. He has problems understanding this.

Overall, the interview data indicated that the Swedish couples discussed paid parental leave more than the French couples, regardless of whether the fathers took leave and to what extent the father finally used paid parental leave days. When talking about taking care of the children, the French couples gave the impression that they lived more separate lives than the Swedish couples. The Swedish fathers expressed a masculinity, which to a greater extent than the French fathers, was integrated with involvement in the everyday care of children.
Conclusions

In summary, the results of the analysis reported here and elsewhere (Almqvist, 2005) provide answers to the research questions. First, fathers and mothers in each county often shared similar reasons and actions in relation to paid parental leave and were influenced by economic situations. Mothers having no or lower incomes were important reasons why they took all or the majority of the parental leave regardless of whether they were French or Swedish. For couples who earned about the same salary some differences were evident between the nations. French fathers underlined the importance of the mother and the child being together when talking about parental leave and childcare. Swedish fathers stressed the importance of being with their children, during parental leave.

Second, a distinct national difference emerged regarding the way fathers and mothers negotiated about parental leave and childcare. Although the evidence is less explicit, French fathers’ responses did not contain expressions noting or implying they had negotiated with their partner about taking the leave or even childcare. Among the Swedish fathers’ responses such evidence was present.

Third, the fathers’ reasoning and actions have implications regarding hegemonic masculinity. French fathers both in practice and rhetoric expressed a fairly conventional masculinity. Both implicitly and explicitly they indicated that it was the mother’s task to take care of children. Given the construction of the French parental leave system with a rather low lump-sum payment, these practices and attitudes were not surprising and in line with fairly unchanged patterns of hegemonic masculinity. These practices and attitudes may be in part a consequence of the fact that the encouragement of fathering is not really on the policy agenda in France (Fagnani, 1999). The patterns of masculinities promoted on the national level appear to affect behaviour on the local level. In contrast, Swedish fathers expressed both in practice and rhetoric, that participation in the care of children was important. In practice, it was expressed through taking a larger portion of paid parental leave. In rhetoric, they indicated involvement in the care of children as well as having negotiated with the mothers about their leave choices. Thus, Swedish fathers often represented a complicit masculinity in relation to hegemonic masculinity that was child oriented. This complicit pattern was not evident among the French fathers, who came the closest to exhibiting behaviour and actions in line with hegemonic masculinity.

The results suggest that some real change may have taken place in Swedish hegemonic masculinity. Swedish fathers do not explicitly state that they think that it is the mother’s job to take care of the children but do express an orientation towards the care of young children. This suggests that the national discourse stressing gender equality has transcended to the local level within the family. But the father’s use of paid parental leave does not always result in shared responsibility for childcare (cf., Sundström & Duvander, 2001) indicating more change has occurred in rhetoric than behavior. To bring about more use of parental leave by fathers a work-oriented equality discourse in combination with a dominant masculinity influenced by a child orientation are vital. These
are expressed through the fairly generous paid parental leave system that encourages Swedish fathers to use the leave. This support is absent for French fathers.

References


