“Out of sight, out of mind”

-A qualitative study of the interrelated character of workplace attitudes and the within-couple division of parental leave

Kajsa Gunnarsson
Abstract

This thesis examines how couples, aiming for a gender equal division of parental leave, experience the interrelated character and process of workplace attitudes and division of parental leave. The data comes from an interview study with twenty couples, of which thirteen are included in this study. The interviews are conducted in 2009 before their first child was born and again in 2010 or 2011, about a year and a half after their child was born. The interviews are a part of the project Between dream and reality. International and national studies of parenthood and work from a gender perspective (principal investigator Marie Evertsson) and was financed by The Swedish Research Council. The interviews have been analyzed from an Expectation States Theory and Doing Gender perspective with an aim to examine which mechanisms differ between the couples that were able to realize their planned division of parental leave and the couples that were not. The results show that the men working in workplaces where attitudes towards them taking a relatively long parental leave were positive also took a relatively long parental leave. On the other hand, many of the women who reported being in a workplace where attitudes to parental leave were positive, took a fairly short parental leave. The workplace support resulted in different outcomes for the men and the women, a relatively long parental leave for men and a relatively short parental leave for women. This could be explained by the different expectations society has on men and women, women are assumed to take a bigger part of the leave than men are. This can indicate that support is more important when breaking the traditional norm than it is when following it. The couples that divided their leave equally were very determined about their division. The couples that did not share their leave equally, were generally not as determined and therefore generally more open to the opinions and attitudes of prevalence at the workplace. The women that took a bigger part of the leave than their partners had a hard time returning to work after their parental leave, they often felt down-prioritized at the work place. The men that took a smaller part and the couples that divided their leave equally did not have a hard time returning to work.

Key words: Parental leave, division, workplace, attitudes, gender

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1 Mellan dröm och verklighet. Internationella och nationella studier av föräldraskap och arbete ur ett genusperspektiv
# Table of Contents

Introduction .................................................................................................................. 1

Aim and research question .......................................................................................... 2

Previous research and theory ....................................................................................... 3

**Previous research** .................................................................................................. 3

Is the character and attitudes of the workplace important for the use of parental leave? .................................................................................................................. 3

Is the division of parental leave important when returning to work after the parental leave? ................................................................................................................. 4

Theory ......................................................................................................................... 5

Doing Gender .............................................................................................................. 5

Expectation States Theory .......................................................................................... 6

The parental leave policy in Sweden .......................................................................... 7

Method and Research Design ....................................................................................... 9

The choice of research design and sample .................................................................. 9

Coding and analysis .................................................................................................... 10

Validity, Reliability and Ethical considerations ......................................................... 11

Results ......................................................................................................................... 13

The interviewees’ experiences of the importance of workplace attitudes’ when planning their parental leave ......................................................................................... 15

The couples that divided their parental leave equally ................................................. 15

The couples that did not divide their parental leave equally ....................................... 21

The interviewees’ experiences of returning to work after their parental leave .......... 26

The couples that divided their parental leave equally ................................................. 26

The couples that did not divide their parental leave equally ....................................... 30
Introduction

In Sweden, the gender equality ideal is strong. However, there seems to be a discrepancy between attitudes and practice regarding gender equality (Alsarve & Boye 2012). An example of this is that Swedish men only used 27 percent of the parental leave in 2016 (Försäkringskassan 2017b). In January 2016, a third reserved month\(^2\) was introduced in the parental leave insurance causing a lot of reactions, positive and negative. Some say that politicians should not get too involved in family decisions, while others think that it is an important step towards gender equality. This has resulted in gender equality in parental leave being a hot topic in Sweden. The discrepancy between the attitudes and practice of gender equality has inspired me to study how couples reason about, prepare for and realize the parental leave division process longitudinally, following a group of couples from before the birth of the first child to about a year and a half after.

This thesis is an analysis of how couples, aiming for a gender equal division of parental leave, experienced the process of the transition to parenthood and what role the workplace attitudes played in this process. The analysis departures from a doing gender perspective (West & Zimmerman 1987; Nentwich 2008) and expectation states theory (Correll & Ridgeway 2004, 2006). The focus is on the importance of workplace attitudes when couples are dividing their parental leave and the importance of division of parental leave for the interviewee’s situation when they return to work. The analysis is based on semi-structured interviews with thirteen heterosexual Swedish couples on topics linked to parental leave, child care, time with the child and work. The interviews were conducted by Jenny Alsarve and Katarina Boye on two different occasions, in 2009 when the couples were expecting their first child and in 2010 and 2011, about a year and a half after the child was born. The original researcher team have used the same data to analyze different topics regarding family life before and after the first child is born, but this is the first time a more thorough study of parental leave and workplace attitudes is conducted with this data.

\(^2\) A reserved month is one month earmarked parental leave for each parent. If the parent that the month is earmarked for does not use it, the parents lose that parental leave month.
Aim and research question

The aim of this thesis is to get a better understanding of the process of division of parental leave and what role the workplace attitudes play in that process. The analysis is done by comparing two groups, both groups consisting of couples with an aim to divide their parental leave equally. The difference between the groups is that the couples in one group did divide the leave equally, while the couples in the other group did not. The analysis of the data combined with previous research and theory gives an idea of what mechanisms are important when making their decision of division. In this thesis, sharing the parental leave equally is defined as the man and woman’s parental leave length differing by no more than one month.

The research questions are the following:

-What was the interviewees’ experiences of the importance of workplace attitudes’ when planning their parental leave?

-What was the interviewees’ experiences of returning to work after their parental leave?

This thesis contributes to earlier research by providing a deeper understanding of the importance of workplace attitudes for the division of parental leave. Since I have access to material containing interviews done at two different occasions, I can compare how the couples planned for their division of parental leave and work and how it actually turned out. I want to understand couples’ experiences of the importance that workplace attitudes have on the process of division of parental leave and what importance that division of parental leave have on returning to work. It is important to understand the interrelated relationship between division of parental leave and work. By understanding this relationship, we get a deeper understanding of why couples divide their parental leave the way they do. This thesis can help explain why the attitudes toward gender equality in parental leave differ from the actual division of parental leave. This is relevant from a sociological perspective but also from a political and societal perspective.
Previous research and theory

In this section, I present previous research done in the field. The theories that I am basing my analysis on, Doing Gender (West & Zimmerman 1987; Nentwich 2008) and Expectation State Theory (Correll and Ridgeway 2006), is then presented. Finally, a short summary of the history and development of the Swedish parental leave policy is presented. The reason is to provide the reader with background knowledge and an overview of the policy, put into context.

**Previous research**

**Is the character and attitudes of the workplace important for the use of parental leave?**

When a couple is going through the process of deciding on how to divide their parental leave, a lot of different factors play a part in their decision. The character and situation of the workplace is one of the factors that seems to matter in the decision of the division. In workplaces with a family friendly culture, the parents tend to use a bigger part of their parental leave (Allard 2007). Research has shown that fathers, living in Stockholm county, working in small workplaces use less parental leave than fathers working in big workplaces. Except from the size, the employment sector seems to matter. Fathers working in the public sector use more parental leave than fathers working in the private sector (Bygren & Duvander 2006). If the workplace of a father is female-dominated, he is more likely to use a bigger part of the parental leave than if the workplace is male-dominated (Bygren & Duvander 2006).

In addition to the character of the workplace, the attitudes at the workplace seem to be of importance. Research has shown that the division of parental leave of a father’s colleagues seems to matter when they are deciding on how to divide their parental leave with their partners. If a father works in a workplace where male colleagues have already used a big part of the parental leave, he is more likely to use a big part himself (Bygren & Duvander 2006). If the managers and colleagues are forerunners they pave the way for the employees taking a bigger part of the parental leave (Allard 2007; Allard, Haas & Hwang 2002). If men work in workplaces that looks unfavorably on employees taking a relatively long parental leave, they
tend to shorten their leave (Bygren & Duvander 2006; Allard, Haas & Hwang 2002). Research based on survey data done by Allard, Haas and Hwang (2002), including fathers working in the private sector, show that men rarely feel supported by the management at their work in their parental leave process. If they feel support at their workplaces, it is more common that it comes from colleagues than managers (Allard, Haas & Hwang 2002). However, if the parental leave leads to more work for colleagues, that can have an impact on their attitudes towards the parental leave. The attitudes of colleagues towards parental leave depend on the workplace structure and the way the managers handle the situation. An example of this can be if the managers arrange for a substitute for the person going on parental leave or if the managers distributes the work tasks on the remaining colleagues resulting in them having more work to do (Allard 2007).

**Is the division of parental leave important when returning to work after the parental leave?**

The way couples divide their parental leave can be of importance for their work life, short term and long term. Parents returning from parental leave can experience changes in the workplace, the managers compensate for the employees being on parental leave which can lead to changes in the organization. This can result in responsibilities and tasks being redistributed among the employees since the manager has to compensate for the lost work during the parental leave. Interviews with managers indicate that they can feel like the employee is obstructing the work plans (Bekkengen 2002). Bekkengen (2002) has done an interview study where she interviewed new parents, colleagues and managers and found a difference in the perception of men and women returning to work after being on parental leave. The women could be considered “rusty” and “dull-minded” while the men could be considered returning “hungry for knowledge” and the work of the men was often viewed upon as more effective (Bekkengen 2002:86-87). The study is conducted fifteen years ago and a lot has happened since then, which must be taken into consideration. By analyzing the data in this study, I will examine if these attitudes are something that the interviewed parents have any experience of in their more recent context.

In addition to these short-term experiences, the length of mothers and fathers parental leave can have long term consequences. Quantitative research on Swedish parents and the development of their wage during the eight years after the birth of their first child show that the length of the parental leave is of importance. The results show that the effect on the
father’s wage is more immediate than the effect on the mother’s, but the length of the leave does not seem to be of the same importance for men. Mothers are affected in another way; the longer the mother’s parental leave are, the more it affects her wage negatively (Evertsson 2016). In an earlier study, Albrecht et al. (1999) found that the fathers’ wages were more negatively affected by the use of a relatively long parental leave. Albrecht et al. (1999) explains this as being a consequence of the different expectations that society in general and managers in particular have on men and women. Since mothers are expected to take a long parental leave, while fathers are not, their managers interpret their leaves differently. The mothers’ leave is considered more normal which generally leads to less consequences, while fathers taking a longer leave is unexpected and therefore seen as the father being uncommitted to work (Albrecht et al. 1999). A study by Kennerberg (2007) show that men and women change their work hours to a different extent when they have a child. Fathers’ working hours does not change much when they have a child, except from an occasional increase in working hours. Mothers, on the other hand, often decreases their working hours upon return to work after they have had children and this can have an effect on the wage development in the long run. Results show that the length of mothers’ parental leave influences the possibilities of getting a promotion, where a long parental leave can result in difficulties in career advancements (Aisenbrey, Evertsson & Grunow 2009).

Theory

Doing Gender

The doing gender perspective provides an explanation of how men and women perform their genders. Doing gender looks at gender as an accomplishment, as something people do. This means that gender is a social process and that individuals are expected to do gender in different ways in different situations and in various contexts. Hence, gender is not a property of a person, decided by the sex, but something that we keep doing and that can change with time (West & Zimmerman 1987). We do gender by following the ruling gender norms. By constructing and reconstructing gendered behavior, a system is created through which individuals are valued and judged by other people. The failure or success will be based on how well the individuals meet the expectations set by their gender (West & Zimmerman 1987). One aspect of doing gender is how men and women do parenthood. Traditionally, the norms of how men and women do parenthood is based on the heterosexual gender binary
where mothers are considered the primary care taker and fathers are expected to be more focused on work. Since fathers often are the breadwinners of the family, they can see themselves as responsible for an entire family’s economy. The traditional view on parenthood has changed as the way people are doing gender in parenthood keeps being reconstructed. An example of this is the fact that fathers gradually have been using a larger part of the parental leave (Duvander & Johansson 2012). When more and more fathers take a bigger part, it behavior becomes more normative. A consequence of this norm change is that norms considering father’s role in the home is also changing, which can lead to fathers taking a bigger responsibility in the home and care more for the children. Although the norms have changed, the norms of the mother and the father are still colored by the traditional ways of doing gender (Nentwich 2008).

**Expectation States Theory**

Expectation states theory (Correll & Ridgeway 2006) focuses on the fact that some individuals in a group have advantage over others. An example of this privileged group membership can be men, when being compared to women in the labor market. The privileged group members often have more opportunities to speak and they have more influence over other group members. These structures are referred to as “power and prestige structures” or “status structures” and establish the foundation of inequality in society (Correll & Ridgeway 2006: 29). The individuals that have the “status characteristics” have more power, are more listened to and their ideas are rated as more valuable than the ideas of the other group members (Correll & Ridgeway 2006). An example is the different expectations that men and women must live up to when it comes to parenthood. This can have a disadvantaging effect on mothers’ workplace outcomes, caused by the social status attached to being the primary caregiver. Since mothers are the ones being pregnant and historically have been the ones taking responsibility of the children, women and not men are the ones that are seen as the primary caregiver. The role of being the primary caregiver comes with different status characteristics, for example downwardly evaluation of the competence as a worker. The cultural definition of “the good mother” and “the ideal worker” is hard to combine (Correll & Ridgeway 2004).

The role of the mother comes with positive characteristics too, characteristics that the society perceives as valuable, but these characteristics are on a lower status level than the positive characteristics of for example “the worker”. Since mothers are not being paid for being a
caregiver, it is hard to compare the compensation of the task to the compensation of paid work. However, the salary of people working in daycare, substituting for the caregivers, can indicate how society is valuing the task. Since the compensation for this kind of work is low compared to other work with a similar amount of education and training, so is the societies perception of the status of this kind of work. Except from having skills with a lower status in general, mothers are also seen as having a lower competence in workplace related activities. Competence is defined as the cultural expectation of a person’s performance capacity (Correll & Ridgeway 2004: 690). This means that a person in the mother role will be expected to make less valuable contributions to the success of tasks than people who are not in the mother role. The performance capacity is based on effort and ability. The mother is expected to engage in intensive mothering, giving all her time and energy to her children. The mother is expected to always be on call for the children, making it hard for her to put as much effort into work as the “ideal worker” who are always supposed be on call for the employer. If the mother is always on call for her children, it is hard for her to have the same time and energy to work as someone who has work as their top priority (Correll & Ridgeway 2004). All this contributes to making the role of the mother opposed to the role of the worker, making it hard for mothers to be able to combine the two roles. This can lead to consequences for the career of mothers, before the child is born, in negotiation about the parental leave and when the mother is returning to work.

The next section provides a short description of the parental leave policy in Sweden, historically and today, providing an important background for the results.

The parental leave policy in Sweden

Parental leave was first introduced in 1974 in Sweden. At the time, parental leave lasted for six months and the parents could share it in whatever way they wanted, often resulting in mothers staying home the whole period. At this point, fathers only used about 1 percent of the parental leave days (Duvander 2014). During the last twenty years, Sweden has gradually introduced reforms with the aim to get fathers to use a larger part of the parental leave, as a part of the Swedish government’s aim for a more gender equal family life (Lundqvist & Roman 2008). In 1995, the first earmarked reserved months, often called “daddy month” and “mommy month” was introduced, reserving thirty days of the parental leave to each parent.
This was followed by the second earmarked month in 2002, reserving in total sixty days of the parental leave for each parent. The introduction of the first and second reserved months in Sweden have had a clear effect on the use of parental leave, fathers started using a bigger part of the leave than they did before (Duvander & Johansson 2012). In 2016, the third earmarked month was introduced, reserving a total of ninety days of the parental leave for each parent (Försäkringskassan 2017a).

The parental leave today is in total 480 days per child. The amount of money that the parents will receive during the first 390 days is based on the parents’ regular salary, while the reimbursement for the last ninety days is 180 SEK per day, the ninety days of earmarked parental leave refers to salary based payment. Except for these ninety days, each parent has 195 days that, regardless of the payment type, can be given to the other parent. The parental leave days can be used until the child is twelve years old, but only 96 of the total days can be saved after the child has turned four years old. (Försäkringskassan link 2017a) The interviews analyzed in this thesis are conducted in 2009, 2010 and 2011, the parental leave policy at that time was sixty earmarked parental leave days for each parent and the parents could only use their parental days until their child was eight years old.
Method and Research Design

The choice of research design and sample

The project *Between dream and reality. International and national studies of parenthood and work from a gender perspective* (principal investigator Marie Evertsson) was financed by The Swedish Research Council. Marie Evertsson was the principal investigator of the Swedish project and one of the coordinators of an international project on a similar theme (together with Daniela Grunow, Frankfurt University). Katarina Boye and Jenny Alsarve did the first in-depth interviews with twenty heterosexual couples in 2009, interviewing the man and the woman separately. At this time the couples were expecting their first child, the second round of interviews was conducted in 2010 or 2011, after the child was born. The interviewees were mainly recruited from maternal care centers, but also from meetings about parental leave at the Swedish Social Insurance Agency, meetings for couples expecting children at hospitals and through banners at websites directed at soon-to-be parents; familjeliv.se and gravid.se. Alsarve and Boye visited the maternal care centers and meetings to tell couples about the project. They also handed out a folder containing information about the project (Alsarve & Boye 2012). Interested couples applied to the project and took part on a voluntary basis. This means that the sample is small and cannot be considered representative for any particular group. Worth noting is that the interviewees have a higher education than the average population and given that they volunteered to take part. This could mean that the interviewees have a bigger than average interest in gender equality and/or parental leave questions, but since my focus in fact is to analyze couples aiming for a gender equal division of parental leave this does not affect the reliability of the thesis. When the second round of interviews were conducted, almost all the parents were back at work and the children had started in day care.

I initially divided the twenty interviewed couples into three different groups; (1) the couples that were aiming for a gender equal division of parental leave in the first round of interviews and that turned out to divide the leave equally, (2) the couples that were aiming for a gender

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3 *Mellan dröm och verklighet. Internationella och nationella studier av föräldraskap och arbete ur ett genusperspektiv*

4 *Försäkringskassan*
equal division but turned out not to divide the leave equally and (3) the couples that did not aim for a gender equal division and that did not divide the leave equally. The definition of “sharing equally” in this thesis is that the length of the parental leave of the parents does not differ by more than a month. In this thesis, I am including the interviews with the couples who expressed a desire to share the parental leave equally, the ones that succeeded to do so and the ones that did not (categories 1 and 2 above). Based on my focus on those who were planning to share the parental leave equally, this leaves me with the thirteen couples. The thirteen couples consist of twenty-six individuals interviewed two times, in total, fifty-two interviews. Since the interviews lasted for 1-2 hours, the material is very rich and includes several hundred pages of transcribed text.

**Coding and analysis**

In this thesis I have used thematic content analysis in order to sort and classify the text material into different sections. Thematic content analysis is helpful when the material is big since it helps when organizing the material, even though it seems hard to manage at first. The coding in thematic content analysis is focused on the meaning of what the interviewees are saying, not just the intrinsic words. When sorting and categorizing the material, long texts are summarized into words or sentences which makes the information easier to handle (Weber 1990). I did the coding of the interviews in a computer program called NVivo. NVivo is a tool helping the researcher to sort, classify and arrange unstructured data. This was done by sorting relevant parts of the interviews into different codes of choice. The categories that I used when coding the interviews are deductive, which means that they are based on theory and the research questions. (Schreier 2012). The codes that I ended up including in the analysis are: “How the division of parental leave turned out”, “Parental leave’s ‘influence on work’”, “The interviewees reasoning on the division” and “The interviewees understanding of managers’ and colleagues’ attitudes on division of parental leave”, in addition to this I used some sub codes. The informants were sorted into different groups based on their gender and whether they divided the parental leave equally with their partner or not. This made it possible to analyze each category group by group to see what experiences were shared and not shared by the informants of each group. Thematic content analysis is a method that focuses on interpreting data in a subjective way. The aim of thematic content analysis is to understand the meaning of the phenomenon that is being studied by analyzing relevant themes of the text (Wildemuth & Zhang 2009). This was done by focusing on relevant patterns in the material to
find what seems to be a pattern within a certain group. Since I am analyzing a phenomenon by comparing the patterns of the phenomenon between two different groups, thematic content analysis is a good fit. Since I started out working with a big material and with an aim to understand the meaning of what the interviewees were saying I felt like this method was a perfect match for this thesis.

**Validity, Reliability and Ethical considerations**

A challenging aspect of this thesis is that I have not done the interviews myself. This means that I have neither transcribed the interviews nor been able to make any notes in the transcribed interviews. However, the transcribing work is done meticulously with notes on for example laughs and pauses, which helped a lot. Another challenging aspect of using secondary data is not having any other information apart from what the material can give. I was worried that not being able to ask follow-up questions would be a problem. But since the interviews are wide-ranging and carefully done, the concern disappeared during the work and I did not feel the need to ask additional questions while working with the data.

An advantage of using the interviews from this project is that they are longitudinal, done on two different occasions with approximately two years between them. The volume of interviews would not have been possible to produce during the period of time for this thesis and I would not have been able to do them as thoroughly as was done in the project. A challenging aspect of qualitative research is that, in most cases, the researcher has ideas and assumptions about the research question. According to Creswell (2007:15), it is important to be aware of the influences of the assumptions and to make said assumptions explicit in writing. A challenge has been to make sure I was not biased when writing the thesis, a common mistake is to direct the analysis in a way that suits the wanted results. A suggestion that I have followed from an article from the Swedish Research Council is that a good way to make sure this does not happen is identifying one’s own believes and thoughts of the results early in the process to be able to return back to that later in the process (Gustavsson, Hermerén & Petersson 2006).

Regarding the ethics when collecting the data, I have received the document given to the interviewees by the interviewers, a document describing what will and will not be done with the interview material. It is important to know what was promised to the interviewees since I
am now handling the transcribed interviews and must follow what was decided. When I received the data it was placed at a secure computer at the university and did not leave the computer during the whole process of the thesis. The reason for this was to make the coding and analyzing process as secure as possible. To guarantee the anonymity of the interviewees, fictive names are used and I have not had access to their true names. Another aspect of guaranteeing the anonymity of the interviewees is to not explain the profession of the informants too thoroughly and not include any information that can reveal who the individuals are. To confirm the agreement on handling the confidential material I have signed a document, guaranteeing that I will follow the ethical rules set up for this project.
Results

In this section, the data relevant to the research question will be presented and discussed in two different themes. The themes, which are based on the research questions, are:

*The interviewees’ experiences of the importance of workplace attitudes’ when planning their parental leave*

*The interviewees’ experiences of returning to work after their parental leave*

The couples that shared their parental leave equally and the couples that did not are presented and discussed separately in each section to facilitate a comparative analysis. In the quotations of this section, underlining of words are used to illustrate the informants emphasizing that word in the sentence. Since the interviews are done in Swedish, the quotations are translated from Swedish to English, but the original Swedish versions of the quotations are available in footnotes. After each quotation, it is noted if the quotation comes from the first or second round of interviews.

Out of the thirteen couples included in this study, seven realized their plans of dividing the parental leave equally and six of them did not. A list of the couples, their occupations and the division of their parental leave is presented below:
Table 1, The couples that shared their parental leave equally:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Names</th>
<th>Occupations</th>
<th>Division of parental leave</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sara</td>
<td>She: Bank clerk</td>
<td>10 months each</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simon</td>
<td>He: Bank clerk</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>She: Social community planner</td>
<td>8 months each</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patrik</td>
<td>He: Lightning technician</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kajsa</td>
<td>She: Teacher</td>
<td>She: 10 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andreas</td>
<td>He: Construction engineer</td>
<td>He: 9 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellinor</td>
<td>She: IT manager</td>
<td>8 months each</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stefan</td>
<td>He: Bank clerk</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eva</td>
<td>She: Web editor</td>
<td>She: 8 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erik</td>
<td>He: Communications manager</td>
<td>He: 7 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linda</td>
<td>She: Project manager</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emil</td>
<td>He: Bank clerk</td>
<td>8,5 months each</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ylva</td>
<td>She: Lawyer</td>
<td>9 months each</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anders</td>
<td>He: Lawyer</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2, The couples that did not share their parental leave equally:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Names</th>
<th>Occupations</th>
<th>Division of parental leave</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Karin</td>
<td>She: Teacher</td>
<td>She: 6 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>He: Web designer</td>
<td>He: 2 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>then both worked halftime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tina</td>
<td>She: Administrator</td>
<td>She:14 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Niklas</td>
<td>He: Controller</td>
<td>He: 7 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lena</td>
<td>She: Journalist</td>
<td>She: 4 months (he: vacation the first 2 months of her leave=home together)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carlos</td>
<td>He: Operations manager</td>
<td>Then 3 months together, then He: 8 months, but the last 3 months’ child-day care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ninna</td>
<td>She: Biological technician</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>He: Programmer</td>
<td>She: 9 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stina</td>
<td>She: Insurance claims clerk</td>
<td>He: 6 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per</td>
<td>He: Faction leader</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isabella</td>
<td>She: Auditor assistant</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Markus</td>
<td>He: Project leader</td>
<td>She: 12 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>He: 6 months</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The interviewees’ experiences of the importance of workplace attitudes’ when planning their parental leave

The couples that divided their parental leave equally

Many of the parents that were able to realize an equal division of their parental leave reported feeling that their managers were supportive of the adjustments that the parents did due to the fact that they were expecting a child. They also said that they felt like their managers were genuinely happy when they received the news about the pregnancy. An example of this is Ellinor who worked as an IT-manager and took an eight-month parental leave. She told her manager that she was pregnant early on in her pregnancy and she got a positive reaction from her:

But I’ve never felt that I got, that I got uncomfortable or that they thought: “okay, this is a bit inconvenient” (...) She said “How nice Ellinor. How do we solve this?”

(Ellinor, first interview)

Ellinor interpreted this as her manager being supportive, she did not feel like her parental leave caused problems for her manager or colleagues at her workplace. All the women in the couples that divided their parental leave equally said that they felt supported by their managers during their pregnancy.

Some of the men in these couples said that they were encouraged to take a relatively long parental leave by their managers and most of them felt like taking half the parental leave was normal and almost expected at their workplaces. At some workplaces, the male interviewees’ perception, that a relatively long leave was the standard, was due to the fact that managers or colleagues encouraged them. At other workplaces, it was because the managers simply asked about the plans for the leave, almost assuming that the employee would use about half the leave. Simon, who worked as a bank clerk and took ten months of parental leave, felt like his manager was very positive towards him taking a relatively long parental leave:

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5 Men jag har aldrig känt att jag blir, att jag har varit obekväm eller att dom har tänkt att ”ja, ja, det här kom ju lite olägligt” (...) Hon sa ”Vad roligt Ellinor. Hur ska vi lösa det?”
And then I’ve also talked to my boss, who’s been very persistent and said that... (…) that it’s something you should really take advantage of... this possibility. And make sure that you can stay home as much as possible. ⁶ (Simon, first interview)

Patrik worked as a lightning technician and took an eight months’ long parental leave. His manager did not react to the fact that he was planning on using half the parental leave:

It was more like, almost in passing, “Okay Patrik, when are you going on parental leave?” “Well, I was thinking I’d leave after New Year’s” “Okay that’s good.” Like that. “Then we know more or less.” So, the big question is just who will be the substitute. ⁷ (Patrik, first interview)

Simon’s manager was almost pushing him to take a relatively long leave, while Patrik’s manager were more casual about it, just asking him when he would be starting his leave and not reacting in any particular way to the answer. Most of the men in the couples that divided their parental leave equally with their partners also said that their colleagues were supportive and happy for them and they felt like the colleagues in their partner’s workplace had also been positive. It seems like the men in these couples were encouraged by their managers to use their parental leave untraditionally, by using half of it.

Some of the women were also encouraged to stay home for as long as possible. An example of this is Kajsa, who worked as a teacher and took a ten-month parental leave. She said that her manager and colleagues encouraged her not to rush back to work:

... she said “Don’t come back too soon!” (…) And yes, there are my colleagues who also said: “Damn it Kajsa, don’t come back too soon” ⁸ (Kajsa, first interview)

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⁶ Sen har jag pratat med min chef också, som verkligen har legat på och sagt att, det... (…) att det är något man verkligen ska utnyttja...den möjligheten. Och se till att man kan vara hemma så mycket som möjligt.

⁷ Det var mer, nästan sådär i förbigående, ”Jaha Patrik, när ska du vara föräldraledig? ”Ja, jag tänkte gå efter nyår” Jaha det är bra” Så. ”Då vet vi ungefär.” Så den stora frågan där är ju egentliga bara vem som ska vara vikarie.

⁸ hon sa ”Kom inte tillbaka för tidigt!” (…) Ja det är ju mina kollegor som också har sagt ”Fan Kajsa, kom inte tillbaka för tidigt”
Maria worked as a social community planner and went on an eight-month parental leave. Her colleagues seemed to assume that she was taking a longer parental leave than she had actually planned:

*The colleagues, my closest colleagues, I think they actually expected me to stay at home a bit longer than I had originally thought. “So, are you going to stay home for a year now then?” they usually say “No I’m not going to do that”. So, you run the risk of returning too early, at least in their world.*  

(Maria, first interview)

Both Kajsa’s and Maria’s colleagues were talking about the length of their parental leave. While Kajsa’s colleagues were giving her advice on the length of her leave, Maria’s colleagues were just assuming that she was going to take a yearlong parental leave. When one parent is going on a one-year parental leave it usually means taking a bigger part of the leave than the partner. The men and the women that shared their parental leave equally generally got the same advice at their work places; to take a long parental leave. This advice has different implications for the men and the women, which can be due to the different societal expectations and norms that are put on mothers and fathers. When a mother is encouraged to take a long parental leave she is encouraged to follow the traditional norm of focusing on the children. When a father is encouraged to take a long parental leave he is encouraged to go against the traditional norm of being the breadwinner of the family, focusing primarily on work.

The couples that divided their leave equally all said that the opinions of others did not matter when making the decision of how to divide the leave. Andreas worked as a construction engineer. His manager did not imply that his nine-month parental leave was a problem in any way, but Andreas did not think that he would have let it change his parental leave plans if his manager had had a more negative attitude:

*No. I don’t think that it would have really mattered. If it wasn’t like somehow clearly articulated. Then you’d be forced to take a stand. But then, the question is rather if I...*

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9 Kollegorna, mina närmsta kollegor, dom förväntar sig nog att jag ska vara hemma lite längre än jag har tänkt vara. Faktiskt. “Ja är du hemma ett år nu då?” brukar de säga ”Nej det tänker jag inte vara” Så risken är att man kommer tillbaka för tidigt i deras värld på något sätt.
had started considering changing workplace in that case, if I didn’t find the terms fair in that way.\(^{10}\) (Andreas, first interview)

Emil worked as a bank clerk and took a parental leave of eight and a half months, just like his partner Linda who worked as a project manager. He clearly stated that the workplace had to adjust to his parental leave, not the other way around:

... if it had been all (...) like moans and sighs, and “how do you figure we’re going to cover for you?” Then I’d be pretty much like: “Solve it” (...) I would have identified that my job isn’t as important as my child and my relationship to Linda. So, I would have said “Sure, then I’ll have to change branch in that case. Then you’ll have to deal with that hit if you think it’s that important. Because I think this is that important.”\(^{11}\) (Emil, first interview)

Simon also worked as a bank clerk but went on parental leave for ten months, just like his partner Sara, he had a similar attitude towards compromising with his parental leave plans:

Well of course, hypothetically it could have been that way if you... No, I still don’t think it would have affected the actual decision, if for instance the employer had given me other signals or so. In that case, it would be more likely that I started to look for another employer (laughter). So, it’s kind of a...matter of principle. (...) We have the right to do so and we decided to split equally.\(^{12}\) (Simon, second interview)

Andreas, Emil and Simon claimed that they would not compromise their parental leave plans. If their managers had tried to make them change their plans, they would have questioned the workplace and the managers instead of their parental leave plans. Although they seem to be

\(^{10}\) Nej, det tror jag att det hade nog inte betyt någonting egentligen, så. Om det inte hade likaså på nått sätt hade varit direkt uttalat. Då hade man ju fått ta ställning till det. Men då är frågan snarare om man hade börjat fundera på om jag skulle byta arbetsplats i såna fall, om jag inte hade tyckt att vikten var lika och huvudspelet på det sättet.

\(^{11}\) ...hade det varit (...) så här suck och stön, och ”hur hade du tänkt att vi skulle täcka upp detta?” Då hade jag i stort sett bara ”Fixa det” (...) Jag hade identifierat att att mitt jobb är inte lika viktigt som mitt barn och min relation till Linda. Så då hade jag sagt... ”Visst, då får jag väl byta kontor i så fall. Så får ni ta den smålen om ni tycker det är så viktigt. För jag tycker det är så viktigt.”

\(^{12}\) Det är klart att hypotetiskt så kanske det hade kunnat göra det om man likaså... Nej jag tror ändå inte att det hade påverkat beslutet i sig, om till exempel arbetsgivaren hade gett andra signaler och så där. Då hade jag nog snarare sikt mig till en annan arbetsgivare (skratt) Så det är lite av...likaså...principfråga också. (...) Vi har rätt till det och vi har bestämt oss för att dela.
very determined, it is hard to know if their uncompromising attitudes would have changed if their managers had had a negative attitude towards the division of their leave. The couples that divided their parental leave equally seems like they were determined and confident in their decision. It seems like the decision of the division of these couples were set in stone before their child was born and that the couples did not let anything jeopardize their decision. Maria, who worked as a social community planner took an eight-month parental leave, just like her partner Patrik who worked as a lightning technician. She talked about work related situations that could have jeopardized the equal division of parental leave, but since the equal division were of such importance to the couple, they refused to let anything change it:

We didn’t let anything happen. I was on the verge of changing jobs but... for various reasons I decided not to do so, and I think that has been good too to not let it affect how we split our parental leave.13 (Maria, second interview)

Ellinor, who was happy with her and Stefan dividing their leave equally, taking eight months each, said that she was a bit jealous about the period that Stefan got to be home with their daughter. She said that the jealousy almost made her stay home on parental leave longer than she and Stefan had originally decided, but that the determination to share the leave equally was stronger.

The women in these couples all had jobs that they liked and workplaces that they enjoyed spending time at. They felt appreciated at work, that their work mattered for the workplace and that their managers noticed their work. Maria, who worked as a social community planner, and took an eight-month parental leave, felt like her manager viewed her work as important:

So at least she expresses... somehow something that I perceive as a positive expectation of what I perform, of what I accomplish, which makes it more fun to come back. And that has an impact on me, definitely. So, you just don’t spread the
days thin... with almost no parental days\textsuperscript{14} at all to be able to be gone for as long as possible.\textsuperscript{15} (Maria, first interview)

Maria explained that the fact that her manager seemed to notice her work and value it as important made her more motivated to go back to work and not make her parental leave longer than planned. Ylva was working as a lawyer and took a nine-month parental leave. She explained that her colleagues were happy that she was not taking a longer parental leave:

\textit{It really wasn’t a problem at all, it was just like... “No problem, we’ll manage” and ... then of course when I say I’m only going to be gone for eight-nine months they all cheer of course, instead of staying at home for fifteen months or so. And the thing is that I have shown them pretty clearly as well that I am prepared to work every now and then during the fall and the spring even if I’m at home so to speak. (…) And that, but that isn’t something they demand from me. But on the other hand, it’s something that I want myself; I want the connection with work.\textsuperscript{16} (Ylva, first interview)}

The fact that Ylva's colleagues were happy to hear that she was taking a short parental leave, compared to the traditional division of parental leave, made her feel important and appreciated at the workplace. Sara, Maria and Ylva expressed that the appreciative attitude towards them and their work made them feel like it made a difference if they were at work or not, which made them motivated to return to work.

\textsuperscript{14} With “parental days” she is referring to days with economic compensation. The parents have the possibility to choose what days to get compensation for, resulting in parents being able to “spread the days thin”. That is referring to not getting compensation for all the days the parents stay home with the child, resulting in them being able to spread the days over a longer period of time. Information about parental leave policies on page 7.

\textsuperscript{15} …Så hon uttrycker ändå…på nått vis något som jag uppfattar som en positiv förväntan på vad jag presterar, vad jag ästadkommer, som gör att det känns roligare att komma tillbaka. Och det påverkar mig, absolut. Så att man inte ligger och segdrar med…jättefå föräldradagar för att vara borta så länge som möjligt och sådär.

\textsuperscript{16} Och det var liksom inget problem alls, utan det var bara... “Det är inge problem, vi fixar det” och...sen självklart när man säger att jag ska bara vara hemma åtta-nio månader så jublar ju alla självklart, för att ”Å vad härligt, då kommer hon tillbaks ganska snart” istället för att vara hemma 15 månader, så. Och sen är det ju det att jag har ju ganska tydligt visat också att jag är beredd på att lite då och då jobba under hösten och våren även fast jag är hemma så att säga (…) Och det, men det är ju ingenting som de kräver av mig. Men däremot är det nånting som jag själv vill, jag vill själv ha kontakten med jobbet och så där.
The couples that did not divide their parental leave equally

In most couples that did not divide their parental leave equally, at least one of the partners felt like their manager or colleagues thought that their parental leave was a problem in some way. Some of the interviewees were expected to work during their parental leave and sometimes colleagues implied that the timing of the parental leave was unfortunate. Some of the male informants said that their managers and colleagues expressed concern when they were talking about their parental leave. This concern was often related to the position the informants had at their workplaces. These informants had demanding positions with a lot of responsibility and it seems like it was hard to find substitutes for them. Peter was working as a web designer, he took a two-month parental leave and then worked half time, splitting some months with his partner Karin who worked as a teacher. Peter’s manager did not seem to encourage his parental leave:

Well I believe my boss is not very happy about it. He would rather not be forced to sign off on parental leave. Well I guess he softened a bit now that more people have children, so he has been forced to realize that people take paternity leave. And above all, I think he had a problem with that, that he thinks the good old days were better, when dads were not on daddy leave but ... oh well. ¹⁷ (Peter, first interview)

Some of the couples that did not divide their parental leave equally said that the attitudes at the workplace was not of importance when making a decision of the division. In Isabella and Markus’ case, it was Markus who changed his mind over the length of his leave. Markus worked as a project leader and went on a six-month parental leave while Isabella worked as an auditor assistant and went on a twelve-month parental leave. Markus got extra parental leave money from his work and since he had used the 180 insurance days after six months, he did not feel like he wanted to go on a longer parental leave. Marcus changed his mind about the length of his parental leave, he first said that he wanted to take a long leave, but at the second interview said that he felt like six months was enough. This resulted in Isabella staying at home for a longer period than him, her work load was not as big in the fall anyway, so Markus perceived Isabella to be okay with staying at home longer. According to Isabella, the

¹⁷ Jag tror ju att min chef är inte så glad över det. Han skulle nog se att han inte var tvungen att ge en föräldraledighet. Han har väl mjukats upp lite i och med att det är flera nu som har fått barn, så att han har fått inse att folk är pappalediga. Och framför allt det tror jag han har haft problem med, att han tycker att det var bättre förr när inte pappor var pappalediga utan...ja.
final division of their parental leave was based on the fact that Markus, during Isabella’s leave, wanted to end a project at work before he went on his part of the leave. Isabella felt like they had agreed on the division but she thought that Markus would start his leave earlier, taking a bigger part. At the second interview, when she was asked if she and Markus had different views on how to divide the parental leave she answered:

\textit{Eeer, no we have not, I don’t think so. Or maybe I thought that he would start his leave earlier. But it wasn… I didn’t mind… being on leave for so long (laughter).}^{18}

(Isabella, second interview)

Markus argued that the months he was already taking were enough, that he did not need any more months. Karin and Peter said that the reason that they changed their division of parental leave from their original plan was the situation at their workplaces. According to Peter, the reason that they divided the leave like they did was that Karin had to adjust to the semesters at the school she was working in and Peter’s general wish to focus on work. Karin felt an expectation that she should adjust her parental leave to the school semesters. One reason for this was that she knew that returning in the middle of a semester would not be appreciated since it would lead to a lot of extra work for the school. In addition, the work she would get offered if she returned in the middle of a semester would not be what she was used to or wanted to do. In Niklas and Tina’s case, Niklas clearly stated that his manager’s opinion were crucial when him and Tina were dividing their parental leave. Niklas’ manager asked him to postpone his parental leave for three months since that would fit better with the work schedule. Niklas talked to Tina about it and they ended up deciding that Niklas’ parental leave would start a couple of months later than planned, making his parental leave three months shorter and Tina’s parental leave three months longer.

\textit{Yes, it was a request. Eeer… or I interpreted it as a request. I don’t know if he interpreted it differently…He is German so…he may not have had full knowledge of the Swedish law and such… But I chose to see it as a request and then I discussed that request with my wife, and she had no greater desire to go back to work, so… so}

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\textsuperscript{18} Eh nej, det har vi väl inte, tror jag inte. Eller jag hade kanske trott att han skulle börja vara ledig tidigare. Men det var inte jag hade inget emot att ...att vara ledig så länge (skratt).
then, well it wasn’t particularly hard, it was very un... uncontroversial.¹⁹ (Niklas, second interview)

In this case, the manager’s request or desire had a direct impact on the division of the couple’s parental leave. Niklas chose to interpret it as a request rather than a demand from the manager. Tina explained that Niklas postponed his part of the parental leave because he was very loyal to his work, he wanted to do what worked best for his workplace. Since Tina had no urge to get back to work she did not mind being on parental leave a couple of months longer, she did not feel ready to go back to work anyway.

Just like the couples that shared their parental leave equally, some of the couples that did not divide their leave equally said that the opinions of managers and colleagues did not change their decision on the division of leave. They reported other reasons for not dividing their leave equally. In Lena and Carlos’ case, Carlos felt like it was important to have a relatively long parental leave with their child, so they changed their minds from an equal division in the first round of interview to Carlos taking a bigger part of the parental leave in the second. In Stina and Per’s case, they had some complications during the first period of the child’s life resulting in Stina wanting to stay home longer than they had originally planned. Stina said that the tough birth of the child and the fact that they had to stay in the hospital for a couple of weeks had a lot to do with the division. Stina felt a lot of worry during the first months of the child’s life, leading to her wanting to stay home longer. In Ninna and David’s case, Ninna stayed home longer than they had originally planned. According to Ninna, they let the breast-feeding and the way they felt during her leave decide how they would do, resulting in Ninna taking a nine-month parental leave while David took a six-month parental leave. David said that a child needs its mother the first period in life, and that it is important to wait for the child to be ready to be without the mother. He said that the division was the result of Ninna wanting to go back to work after nine months. She was ready to go back to work and to let David take responsibility for the child. It seems like these three couples have adjusted the length of the parental leave to one of the parents wish to stay home longer. In at least two of this couples, this wish was expressed during the parental leave.

¹⁹ Ja, det var ett önskemål. Ehm...Eller jag tolkade det som ett önskemål. Sen vet jag inte om han tolkade det ann...Han är tysk så ...han kanske inte hade full koll på svensk lag så där...Men jag valde att ta det som ett önskemål, och sen diskuterade jag det önskemålet med min fru, och hon hade ingen större önskan att gå tillbaka till sitt jobb, så...så då, ja det var inte särskilt svårt, det var väldigt o...okontroversiellt.
Most couples that did not share their parental leave equally have one thing in common; they did not decide exactly how they were going to divide their parental leave before their child was born. Most of these couples waited until their child was a couple of months old to see how they felt about the division.

The men that did not share their parental leave equally all said that they enjoyed their work, although several of them said that they often felt that their work was too stressful. The men felt important at their workplaces and they felt like the work they did mattered a lot. Some of the women, on the other hand, said that their managers were not acknowledging their needs or appreciating them. Ninna was working as a biological technician and took a nine-month parental leave, which is three months longer than her partner David’s parental leave. Ninna said that she was unsatisfied with her work situation, she did not feel appreciated at work and she felt like her manager was taking advantage of her, which made her unwilling to cooperate. She felt like her employer was demanding that she worked during her parental leave:

Well, they are of the opinion that you should write x number of articles (...) But hey, I must admit that I haven’t … bothered. That is, I don’t care because... for as long as I have a permanent position I can’t be bothered with how... I can, like, don’t give a damn. Like I don’t even know if there’s any special arrangement for, for being on mommy leave. 20 (Ninna, first interview)

The fact that Ninna felt unsatisfied and unappreciated at work made her unmotivated to maintain contact with the workplace during her parental leave. In Ninna and her partner David’s case, it seems like it was two different factors leading to an unequal division of their parental leave. At first, Ninna wanted to be on parental leave the first six months, after the six months she wanted to stay home a couple of months more, leading to a total of nine months. When David was on his parental leave, their child got a place in a preschool resulting in David taking a shorter leave than planned.
Another informant, Karin, who worked as a teacher, talked about the implied expectations she was experiencing from her workplace. In the first interview she felt like she had to adjust the parental leave plans to what fitted the school she worked in. Her plan was to go on parental leave for six months’ full-time until April, and then work half time until the summer since it was harder for the school to give her full-time courses in the end of the semester. She would be able to start up some courses in April but not enough to fill out a full-time position. When the interviewer asked her if she would prefer to come back full-time in April she answered:

*It completely depends on what kind of employment they can offer. Like now it’s only a couple of months, but I don’t want to end up with, for example... teaching Swedish or whatever, the courses that you’re not usually teaching, just because you’re superfluous. And like, I know I’m not supposed to care but I do know that they are sighing and think that I’m a bit of a pain if I come back and demand a full-time position at the end of the semester. It’s just not a good fit. But... You’re not supposed to care, but it...*\(^{21}\) (Karin, first interview)

Karin felt that the workplace attitudes came from an expectation that she should adjust her parental leave to the school semesters. The school was obligated to let her come back full-time, but she was afraid that they would fill the rest of her time with rubbish (as she expressed it) if she did so. This resulted in her parental leave being longer than planned, Karin went on a six-month long parental leave while her partner Peter went on a two-month parental leave, then they both worked half time.

To summarize, the men that divided their parental leave equally with their partners all perceived their workplaces as encouraging fathers to take a relatively big part of the parental leave. When a heterosexual couple is dividing their parental leave equally the man is perceived as taking a long parental leave and the woman as taking a short parental leave. Several of the men that did not take half of the parental leave had perceived attitudes of concern or disapproval concerning the length of their parental leave. The men that divided their parental leave equally said that the attitudes at their workplace was not of any

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\(^{21}\) *Det beror helt på vad de kan erbjuda för sysselsättning. Alltså, nu är det bara några månader, men man vill ju till exempel inte hamna... och undervisa svenska, eller vad som helst, jämte dom ämnena man inte har, bara för att man är över. Och alltså, nu ska man inte bry sig men man vet ju att dom suckar och tycker att man är lite jobbig om man kommer tillbaka och kräver en hellådsstjäst så där i slutet på terminen. Det passar liksom inte egentligen. Men... Det ska man inte bry sig om, men det...*
importance when dividing their parental leave, while the men that did not divide their parental leave equally reported having different experiences. It is hard to know if these men can perceive to what extent the attitudes at their workplaces matter when making a decision. The women that shared the parental leave equally with their partners generally had workplaces that were more supportive of their parental leave than the women that did not. Some of these women were encouraged to go on a long parental leave while some were encouraged to return to work after a relatively short parental leave. Although this differed in the group of women that divided their parental leave equally, they all reported having a good relationship to their workplaces and felt a general support at their workplaces.

The interviewees’ experiences of returning to work after their parental leave

The couples that divided their parental leave equally

The women that shared their parental leave equally with their partners all said that they felt welcomed back by their managers when returning to their workplaces. Even though the response was positive, some of the women in these couples received comments from colleagues regarding their parental leave. Sara, who worked as a bank clerk and used ten months of the parental leave got several comments regarding the length of her leave:

*There has been a lot of people who found it weird that I was just at home for such a short while.* 22 (Sara, second interview)

Some of the men, on the other hand, received comments regarding how long parental leave they used. Andreas, who worked as a construction engineer and went on a nine-month parental leave, said that he received comments from some of his colleagues at work:

*Nothing more than old men at work who find it ridiculous to be on daddy leave, but (laughter) I guess old habits die hard, I don’t think they mean anything that bad…*

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22 *Det har varit många som har tyckt att det har varit konstigt att jag har varit hemma så kort tid.*
They can go on nagging about it, I don’t give a damn (laughter).  

(Andreas, second interview)

Sara’s partner Simon, who was also working as a bank clerk and took a ten-month parental leave, also got remarks from some of his colleagues:

We work in Scandinavia, and there’s certain differences in how you view parental leave in the different Scandinavian countries. And the most obvious part is probably Denmark, where they probably still think that it’s pretty weird that dads are supposed to take some time off at all. So, over there you notice it. But not at home.  

(Simon, second interview)

Both Simon and Andreas said that the colleagues’ comments were not important for the way they thought about their leave. It seems like the women who got remarks for staying at home such a “short” period and the men that got remarks for staying at home such a “long” period of time were confident in their decision. A parental leave that is considered short for a mother can often be the same length as a parental leave that is considered long for a father. It seems like the mothers run a risk of returning to work “to soon”, something that the fathers do not seem to be able to do. Following a traditional norm usually does not require as much analysis and thoughts as breaking a pattern and going in another direction. A thoughtful process can lead to confidence in the matter. Then, on the other hand, these couples had the equality discourse on their side, probably making it easier to stand up for an equal division of their parental leave.

Both the men and women of the equal splitting couples felt like it was easy to return to their work tasks. They did not feel like much had changed at their workplaces or like they had missed out on important things. Their work situations were more or less the same as before.
their parental leaves and they felt like it was easy to jump right back in. Simon talked about his experiences of returning to work after his 10 months long leave:

'It hardly feels like I’ve been away in one way. It’s not like I have... been... like down-prioritized in any way. No, I had work assignments to deal with immediately.'\(^{25}\) (Simon, second interview)

Eva, who worked as a web editor and went on an eight-months long parental leave also talked about her experiences of returning to work after the parental leave:

'Well, of course there are some things that have changed, but not that... much. I think it was pretty easy to get into how I am used to do things...'\(^ {26}\) (Eva, second interview)

Anders, who worked as a lawyer and took a nine-month parental leave, also experienced returning to work in a positive way:

'No, it was pretty much like going straight back to the same work assignments and stuff, like the same areas of responsibility and then it was like (...) If you’re gone long enough you disappear from people’s phone lists and stuff (...) But it hasn’t been like... There has not been anyone taking responsibilities away from me or anything like that, it was just right back on it.'\(^ {27}\) (Anders, second interview)

Patrik, who worked as a lightning technician and went on an eight-month parental leave, did not think that his parental leave had a negative impact on his career, he felt like it had not changed his work situation in any way, positive or negative. Stefan, who worked as a bank clerk and went on an eight-month parental leave just like his partner Ellinor, actually got a

\(^{25}\) Det känns knapp som man har varit borta på ett sätt. Det är inte så att man har...blivit...liksom nedprioriterad på något sätt. Utan jag hade ju direkt arbetsuppgifter att ta tag i så och så där.

\(^{26}\) Alltså, det är klart att det är lite saker som hade ändrats sådär, men inte så...jättemycket. Jag tycker att det gick rätt lätt att liksom komma in i sitt gamla...

\(^{27}\) Nej det var ganska mycket att gå rakt in i alltså samma arbetsuppgifter och såna saker, samma ansvarsområden och så var ju (...) År man borta tillräckligt länge så försvinner man ur folks telefonlister och sådär (...) Det har ju inte blivit...det är ingen som har flyttat från ansvarsområden från mig eller nåt sånt utan det var bara att gå rakt in igen.
better work situation when he came back from his parental leave. The leave led to him getting rid of work tasks and responsibilities that he wanted to get rid of:

...My work situation when I got back was so much better. And that’s thanks to my boss who was… attentive and saw… she was really there and made it possible for me to hand over that stuff. And even made sure I didn’t have to take back those tasks when I got back. And that was mainly done to give me the best possible situation both at work and at home.28 (Stefan, second interview)

One thing that most of the equal-sharing men mentioned was that they, by choice, had put their careers aside for the time being. Since they had a new responsibility in life, their priorities had changed. Stefan explained his new priorities:

Well, work is important, because it’s something that you get… it’s your livelihood and it’s part of your social life. I work in a very good company where I’m happy with both my colleagues and the work climate in general. But… eer… I think… and I don’t think it will change that much in the nearest future. But work isn’t… super important to me. It’s… if I had to choose between work and family the obvious choice is family of course. Eer… unless somehow, I wouldn’t be able to piece it together. But… if I have a very important meeting and I have to go pick up Ida from day care I wouldn’t make things complicated in that situation, I would just go and pick her up, and take the meeting another time instead.29 (Stefan, second interview)

As Stefan explained, he would not prioritize an important meeting over picking up his daughter from day care. He had taken a clear stand and did not want work to have a negative impact on his family life. Emil worked as a bank clerk and took a parental leave of eight and a half months, just like his partner Linda. At the second round of interviews the couple had

28 ...Min arbetssituation när jag började igen såg jättemycket bättre ut. Och det var ju mycket tack vare att min chef…var lyhörig och såg,…alltså hon var verkligen med och styrde så att jag fick lämna över dom här grejerna. Och även styrde så att jag inte behövde ta tillbaka dom när jag kom tillbaka igen. Och det var ju mycket för att kunna ge mig en så bra situation både på jobbet och hemma som möjligt.

three children, soon after their first child they had twins. Emil did not think that his family life would have a negative impact on his career. On the other hand, he thought that the fact that he had become a father might be positive for his career:

*I think I’ll be perceived as more serious... as a family man in the business I’m in.*

*So, in that sense I think it will make things easier for me.* (Emil, second interview)

Emil did not think that the fact that he was taking half the parental leave and was going to take half the child’s sick days would have a negative impact on his career as long as he stayed in the same workplace:

*If I go somewhere else, well then, I’d actually have to sit down and tell my employer, in a job interview, that “me and my wife will split our children’s sick days 50-50. We have three kids. Well, you can figure out what that will entail.” To make sure I don’t switch jobs without telling the whole story.* (Emil, second interview)

Emil said that he was explicit about letting his workplace know his priorities, the reason for this was that he did not want to get into conflicts that would lead to something negative for his family life in the long run.

**The couples that did not divide their parental leave equally**

The women that did not share their leave equally said that they felt that it was hard to return to work after the parental leave, except for two, Lena and Karin. Tina, who was working as an administrator, took a fourteen-month long parental leave while her partner Niklas, who worked as a controller took a seven-month leave. Tina was one of the women that found it hard to return to work after her parental leave. She explained her experiences:

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30 *Jag tror att jag kommer att upplevas som mer seriös...som familjefar I den här branschen jag är. Så ur det perspektivet kommer det nog snarare underlättat.*

31 *Om jag går externt, ja då gäller det ju faktiskt att jag sitter och pratar och säger till min arbetsgivare, i en jobbintervju ”jag och min hustru tänker dela 50-50 på vabb. Vi har tre barn. Ni kan ju räkna ut själva vad det kommer innebära.” Så man inte byter jobb på fel premisser.*
Tina: Anyway, I work with health insurance. So, a lot of things have changed, and a lot of things are new. My job is very complex... When... you come back after over a year, well then, it’s a lot that has changed. I still struggle in my job because I don’t know all the different...

I: ...Rules and that is...

Tina: Yes... And I had changed office, so it was a new office and new colleagues and so... 32

(Tina, second interview)

Ninna, who worked as a biological technician went on parental leave for nine months, compared to her partner David’s’ six-month parental leave, she also had a hard time returning to work:

Yes, it felt good to work, but it didn’t feel good that everybody suddenly had taken over my assignments. That’s what happened, and I know it happens to a lot of people. Because you’re “out of sight, out of mind” (...) now I got other assignments. Well, I guess it’s okay, but... but it wasn’t nice to come back and realize you’ve been replaced by someone even if... they say you will go back to your old job. (...) But of course, I still have the same position but I don’t do... the same things I used to do. So, it was just to start over again. (laughter)33 (Ninna, second interview)

Stina, who worked as an insurance claims clerk and went on parental leave for ten months while her partner Per went on a six-month parental leave, said that she felt like she missed out on work opportunities because of her parental leave. She felt like some of the work that she had done before was in vain:

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32 Däremot så är det så att jag jobbar med sjukförsäkringen. Så det är jättemycket som har ändrats, och det är jättemycket som är nytt. Det är ett väldigt komplext jobb jag har då. När...du kommer tillbaks efter över ett år så är det ju, var det, är det väldigt mycket som har förändrats. Jag kämpar för att jag inte kan alla olika...
I: ...Regler och som är
Tina: Ja...Och så hade jag ändrat kontor, så det var ju ett annat kontor och nya kollegor och så.

33 Ja det kännes bra att jobba, men det kännete inte bra att andra helt plötsligt tagit över ens jobb. Så det var det som skedde, och jag vet att det händer många. Alltså, man är "ut av syn, ut av sinne’’ (...) nu har jag fått andra uppgifter. Ja...och det är ju okej, men...men det var inte bra det där med att komma och upptäcka att...man liksom hade blivit ersatt av någon även om...det heter att man ska komma tillbaka till sitt gamla jobb. (...) Men jag har säkert kvar min gamla anställning men jag gör inte...de saker jag brukar göra. SÅ det var bara att börja om från början igen (skratt).
At our job, there’s a lot of side projects on top of our assignments, so if you’re at work then you have the possibility to show interest in advancement by organizing courses or being part of a project or take on some extra assignments and such. Which means that when you come back you don’t have anything like that. And I felt that was hard when I came back, I had worked hard for all that so I had a lot on my plate before I left and then... Of course, I had none of that when I came back.\textsuperscript{34}

(Stina, second interview)

One of the women that did not share the experience of having a hard time at the workplace when returning was Lena, who worked as a journalist and took a smaller part of the parental leave than her partner Carlos. Lena went on a seven-month parental leave and said that she did not feel like there had been any big changes at her workplace and she felt like it was easy to get back. Lena had a really hard time returning to work personally, she wanted stay on parental leave longer to be with her child, but she did not experience difficulties at the workplace. On the other hand, her husband Carlos, who worked as an operations manager and stayed at home a total of eleven months felt like it was hard to return to work after the leave:

\begin{quote}
Yeah well, some parts have changed. Not everything but some bits and pieces. I’ve had a really hard time adjusting at work. I never actually thought that would be the case.\textsuperscript{35}
\end{quote}

(Carlos, second interview)

The two women, Lena and Karin, that did not experience a hard time returning to work, much like the women that divided their parental leave equally, are the two women that went back to work the fastest. Some of the women that divided their parental leave equally went on parental leave for the same number of months as some of the women that did not divide the leave equally with their partner. Even though the exact number of months of the parental leave may not matter for the experience of returning to work, the length of their parental leave can say something about these women’s relationships with their workplaces. Many women

\textsuperscript{34} På mitt jobb så är det väldigt mycket liksom sidoprojekt på sidan av det vi gör, så att när man är på jobbet så har man möjlighet då om man vill visa framfötterna att hålla i utbildningar eller vara med i något projekt eller få liksom lite olika uppdrag och sånt där. Så det är väl det att då har man ju ingenting när man kommer tillbaka, så det är väl mer så. Och det var det jag tyckte var lite jobbigt när man kom tillbaka att jaha, då hade man liksom jobbat upp det där så man hade så man hade så mycket innan man gick, och sen blev...Hade man ju naturligtvis ingenting när man kom tillbaka.

that had a more troubled relationship to their workplaces took a longer parental leave. The employee’s relationship with the workplace can directly or indirectly be of importance for the return to work.

The women and some of the men that did not share their leave equally said that the way they prioritized their time had changed, that they had cut back on their slacking time at work, worked more efficiently and did not work overtime unless it was absolutely necessary. Their priorities had changed in benefit to the family. There were some men, however, that wanted to continue focusing on work. Peter worked as a web designer and went on a two-month parental leave before he split the parental leave with his partner Karin and worked half time. Peter’s long term goal was to start his own business where he could regulate his work hours more to make it fit the family life better, until then he wanted to work full-time:

I: (...) But what are your thoughts on working hours? Full-time or part time in the future, how do you want to do? And why?

Peter: In the nearest future, I’d like to work here (with the current employer) full-time because I’m so content with my new assignments.

I: Mm.

Peter: But at the same time, it would be... It’s sort of a dream that my own plans would become... something that brings in money so we can sustain ourselves and have more flexible work hours and maybe cut back on the hours and... and oh well.

I: Invest in that?

Peter: Invest in that yes, be able to work when it is suitable for yourself, have more flexible work hours.

I: How would you like Karin to work in the future? Time wise... full-time or part time?

Peter: I think it would better if she worked part time so that... if we can make ends meet then I think it’s better (...)36 (Peter, second interview)
Niklas, who worked as a controller and were on a seven-month parental leave during the second round of interviews, explained his work situation after their child was born:

Niklas: (...) I... thought at first that I was about to level down and take it a bit easy at work. Pretend to work... work 30-35 hours a week maximum, pretending to work full-time, sneak out... And so I did, indeed, for a year. And one day I was totally bored. Because it was so boring to... not to do all the stuff I used to do. Which affe... having gone from... performing at the maximum level to... half the speed really, was numbingly boring. (...) So, I went to my boss and said that I was bored and wanted a new position... and... eer... so we decided that I would get a new role when I came back... so.... (...)

I: But what do you think about coming back, how much are you going to work then? Full-time or part time?

Niklas: No, I’m counting on full-time. If you ask Tina she’ll say we haven’t fully decided on everything, but... with picking up and dropping off at day care, but...

Somehow, I will make sure to work full-time and... Tina will have to work part time.

I: Why is it that you’re thinking about it this way?

Niklas: Money. 37 (Niklas, second interview)

Niklas wanted to increase his work load and start working full-time again, he wanted his partner Tina, who worked as an administrator to work part time. The reason for this was, according to Niklas, that he earned more money than Tina. Even if the money plays a role in how Niklas were thinking, he was also saying that not working fulltime made him bored. It ...
seems like he also wanted to work fulltime for his own sake and thought that Tina could stay home more, taking a bigger responsibility for their child. Tina, on the other hand, wanted them both to reduce their work hours to be able to focus on the family. Niklas said that he was willing to work part time if Tina got another job where she was earning more money.

To summarize, the men and women that divided their parental leave equally said that they did not experience a hard time returning to work. In many of the couples that did not divide the parental leave equally the women reported having a hard time returning to work while the men in these couples had the easiest time returning to work.
Discussion

In this thesis, I use thematic content analysis to analyze how couples, aiming for a gender equal division of parental leave, experience the interrelated character of workplace attitudes and division of parental leave. Since the interviews are conducted at two different occasions, I can compare how the couples planned for their division of parental leave and work and how it actually turned out. The couples that divided their parental leave equally and the couples that did not are analyzed separately, because I want to highlight the differences and similarities of their experiences of workplace attitudes and division of parental leave. This is done to provide a deeper understanding of the importance of workplace attitudes for the division of parental leave.

The qualitative analyses show that many of the men that divided their parental leave equally with their partners had managers and colleagues that encouraged fathers to take a relatively big part of the parental leave or simply found fathers taking a relatively big part of the parental leave normal. By presuming that fathers take a relatively long parental leave, or encouraging them to do so, these workplace attitudes contribute to reconstructing the idea of doing gender as a father since childcare then becomes a more natural part of being a father. Some of the men that did not divide their parental leave equally reported perceiving attitudes of concern or disapproval from colleagues or managers concerning the length of their parental leave, or simply got comments about it. The colleagues and managers of these fathers seem to have a more traditional view on doing gender as a father and seem to have expectations on the fathers to be “the ideal worker” rather than focusing on parenthood (Correll & Ridgeway 2006). In contrast, the women in these interviews do not seem to respond the same way as the men when being encouraged to go on a relatively long parental leave. The women that shared their parental leave equally with their partners often had more supportive workplaces than the women that did not. The equal sharing women reported having a good relationship to their workplaces and felt a general support at their workplaces, they felt like their work mattered. The relationship to the workplace for the women that did not divide their parental leave equally were more diverse, but several of the women did not have the same kind of relationship to their workplaces as the equal sharing women did. Support from colleagues and managers can contribute to positive feelings towards the workplace in general, which might
lead to these women feeling more motivated to return to work. It also seems like the loyalty towards the workplace can be of importance when deciding how to divide their leave. If they felt like the workplace was responsive to their needs, they were generally more responsive to the needs of the workplace.

According to expectation state theory, the cultural definition of “the good mother” and “the ideal worker” is hard to combine (Correll & Ridgeway 2004). The women that divided their parental leave equally with their partners did not talk about experiencing that. The women that did not share their parental leave equally had a generally more difficult experience combining parental leave and work expectations. From a doing gender and expectation states theory perspective, the difference between the men and the women of these couples can be explained by the different expectations society has on men and women. The traditional division is that men are the breadwinners of the family and women are the primary caretakers, these are the expectations that still linger in our society (Nentwich 2008). Therefore, women who take a relatively short parental leave and men who take a relatively long parental leave are breaking the traditional pattern. When a heterosexual couple is dividing their parental leave equally the man is perceived as taking a long parental leave and the woman as taking a short parental leave. This can indicate that support is more important when breaking the traditional norm than it is when following it. For the men, it can be challenging to not live up to the role of the “ideal worker” while women can struggle with not living up to the role of the primary caretaker (Correll & Ridgeway 2004). Since breaking both these roles can be questioned, the support of the workplace can be of importance when doing so. Research has shown that workplaces with a family friendly culture contributes to parents taking a bigger part of the parental leave (Allard 2007). If men work in workplaces with an unfavorably attitude on taking a relatively long parental leave, and it is uncommon for colleagues to do so, they tend to shorten their leave (Bygren & Duvander 2006; Allard, Haas & Hwang 2002).

Since all the couples were originally aiming for an equal division of parental leave the couples that did not end up with an equal division somehow changed their minds. The couples that shared their leave equally were very determined about their division and most of them had decided on the exact number of months each parent would be on parental leave before their child was born. The couples that came across something that jeopardized their equal division, a new job offer for example, prioritized the equal division instead. The couples that did not share their leave equally were generally not as determined. In the first round of
interviews they said that they were going to divide the parental leave equally, but that they were flexible and did not see the importance of dividing equally down to the day, just for the sake of an equal division. They had not decided on the exact division in the first round of interviews and did not do so until a couple of months after the child was born. This could indicate that the couples that did not divide their leave equally were generally more open to the opinions and attitudes of others. Another possible explanation is that these men are more open to their own feelings about their parental leave than the men that divided their leave equally. These men could be more open to the way they feel about being home, taking care of children are before they make up their minds about the division. Making a decision of division of parental leave based on the own feelings can lead to a more traditional division.

There are some couples that did not divide their parental leave equally, who said that the opinions from managers or colleagues or the general situation at work made a difference in the process of deciding on the division of the parental leave. It is hard to know to what extent it is true that the attitudes at their workplaces were not of importance for the rest of the couples, but as mentioned above, the men that divided their leave equally all had managers supporting the equal division while the men that did not did not receive the same support. It is possible that the opinions and attitudes of the managers and colleagues were more important for some couples than they say or know themselves. Another possible explanation could be that the men that divided their leave equally with their partners were determined to do so which the managers and colleagues perceived. The men that did not divide their leave equally, on the other hand, could have been perceived as more open to changes of the division.

In the equal sharing couples, the man and the woman generally shared the gender roles quite equally by sharing the role as the breadwinner of the family, or the “Ideal worker”, which means that that the possibility of sharing the traditional role of the primary caregiver also is bigger. In the couples that did not divide their leave equally the men and women generally had different work experiences. The men felt happy with their workplaces, they felt like their work mattered and felt appreciated, although some of them reported sometimes working too much. Some of the women, on the other hand, did not feel as happy with their workplaces. Some of them felt unappreciated and some of them felt like their work situation was uncertain. The men in these couples seem to had taken on the role of the breadwinner and “ideal worker”, often working long hours and putting a lot of effort into their performance at work. Since the women in these couples generally did not have the same situation as their
partners, they could be more prone to take on the role as the primary caregiver. This means that work situations for these couples can be part of the explanation to why they divided their parental leave in a more traditional way.

The men and women that divided their parental leave equally seldom experienced a hard time returning to work, they felt like it was easy to get back into it. In the couples that did not divide the parental leave equally, many of the women had a hard time returning to work. Some of these women felt like they had missed out on work opportunities, some felt like a lot had changed at the workplace and some returned to find that colleagues had taken over responsibilities and work tasks. Since these women did not perceive the attitudes at their workplaces as supportive before they went on parental leave, it is possible that this was also the case when they returned. The men that took a smaller part of the parental leave than their partners were the group that had the easiest time returning to work. Research done by Bekkengen (2002) has found a difference in the perception of men and women when they return to work. The women were considered “rusty” and “dull-minded” while the men were considered returning “hungry for knowledge” that “increases effectiveness” (Bekkengen 2002). This is something that some of the couples that did not divide their parental leave equally seems to have experienced to some extent, while the equal-sharing couples did not seem to have that experience in the same way. If the manager perceives the employee as not focused on work, that person will have a harder time getting a promotion (Aisenbrey, Evertsson & Grunow 2009). As expectation state theory explains, motherhood can result in disadvantages for mothers’ workplace outcomes, such as disadvantage in salary and promotions, caused by the social status attached to being the primary caregiver (Correll & Ridgeway 2004, 2006).

Future research that would be very interesting, with this thesis as a point of departure, is to interview the couples once again in a couple of years to see how the different dynamics of the families have developed during the first years with the child in day care. It would be interesting to ask the couples how they divide their care of sick children and if they work fulltime or part time. To interview the same couples again would give indications of the long term consequences that being a parent to small children on the labor market leads to.
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