

Beyond the Clock: Uncovering the Relation between Working Overtime and Paid Parental Leave Uptake

Extended abstract

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ABSTRACT

The transition to parenthood perpetuates gender inequality, impacting mothers' labour market participation and fathers' involvement in caregiving roles. This study investigates the workplace's role in this inequality, focusing on the influence of working overtime, signalling a strong ideal worker norm. Does the ideal worker norm discourage parents from spending time with their child and taking up parental leave? Using administrative register data from Sweden, I examine whether working overtime predicts parental leave uptake. The administrative data covers the entire Swedish population and is collected annually. Preliminary findings showed that in couples where fathers worked overtime, fathers would take less leave than their non-overtime counterparts. Working overtime predicted mothers' leave uptake to a lesser extent. Further analyses will explore this relationship and will include factors such as overtime within the workplace and organisation, shedding light on the complex relationship between the gendered workplace culture and gendered parenting roles. This study contributes to understanding the hurdles fathers face in taking parental leave due to an unsupportive workplace culture, ultimately highlighting the need for a more equitable approach to parental leave policies and work cultures.

INTRODUCTION

The transition to parenthood plays a significant role in the persistence of gender inequality. Research indicates a discrepancy in how this transition affects genders differently. While the impact on new fathers appears minimal, its implications for women in the labour market are substantial, influencing their income, working hours, and overall labour force participation (Evertsson & Duvander, 2011; Kleven et al., 2019). Mothers, in particular, find themselves compelled to reduce their paid working hours as they take on an increased share of unpaid caregiving responsibilities (Girardin et al., 2016). While Swedish fathers believe that taking care of their child is important (Almqvist, 2008), they still struggle to reduce their paid work to do so. Even though Swedish paid parental leave policy is aimed at increasing fathers' participation in child care, there remains a gender gap in its use. Possible explanations for the unequal use of parental leave include individuals' characteristics (e.g., level of education and income, gender attitudes) and couple decisions (e.g., relative income) (Duvander, 2014; Kaufman & Almqvist, 2017). However, decisions about parental leave uptake are not made into a vacuum, as it involves taking time off from work to take care of the child. Fathers' limited use should be thus understood as an interplay between family decisions and the workplace context (Reimer, 2020). The latter has been often overlooked and is the focus of this study.

The workplace is an important factor in the unequal uptake of parental leave, as the policy measure is embedded in the culture and structure of workplaces (Haas & Hwang, 2019b). The

workplace's culture and structure can hinder fathers' parental leave usage (Bygren & Duvander, 2006; Haas & Hwang, 2019a; Kim, 2022; Mun & Brinton, 2015). For example, no substitute worker is provided when fathers are out on parental leave, which pressures them into taking shorter leave as not to burden their co-workers (Kaufman, 2018; Kaufman & Almqvist, 2017). Fathers are also influenced by the parental leave-taking of their co-workers (Bygren & Duvander, 2006). Furthermore, managers can discourage fathers from spending time with their children and threaten them with negative career consequences (Hennekam et al., 2023; Samtleben et al., 2019).

It is this important to uncover the hurdles fathers face to take up parental leave due to an unsupportive workplace culture. A part of the organisational culture lies in the devotion of time to the workplace, where working long hours can signal higher commitment (Fried, 1998). In a workplace culture where a lot of commitment is expected, workers state that they fear negative consequences in the workplace when taking parental leave (Samtleben et al., 2019). The effect of working overtime on the uptake of parental leave has, however, remained relatively uncharted territory in existing research. While quantitative and qualitative research has delved into the dynamics of the workplace culture and the pervasive ideal worker norm, to date there has been a notable absence of quantitative analyses using administrative data to quantify the relationship between working overtime and parental leave uptake. Quantitative research has previously explored the relation between workplace culture and working hours (Bernhardt & Buenning, 2020) and the relation between workplace culture and parental leave (Haas et al., 2002) using survey data. Such survey data have provided valuable insights into individuals' perceptions of their own overtime and that of their peers. This article aims to enhance our understanding by using data from actual workplace overtime practices.

A CULTURE OF OVERWORK IN GREEDY ORGANISATIONS

An organisation that demands total commitment has been coined as a 'greedy organisation' (Cosser, 1967). The workplace culture in such organisations is one where the ideal worker norm is strongly present. The ideal worker is expected to prioritize work over other life responsibilities, such as taking parental leave or other work-life balance measures (Blair-Loy, 2005). In workplaces with a strong ideal worker norm, employees were more likely to report negative career consequences when taking parental leave (Samtleben et al., 2019). A greedy organisation punishes its workers when they do not comply to the expectations, as taking time away from work to take up care responsibilities disrupts "the orderly flow of work, causing difficulties for managers, supervisors, and co-workers" (Acker, 1998, p. 199). Leave-taking is expected to minimally disrupt the workplace (Haas & Hwang, 2019a).

The full dedication of the ideal worker is related to the work hours of the employees. An ideal worker often works longer hours, which signals higher productivity and commitment (Fried, 1998). Using survey data among German parenting couples, Bernhardt and Buenning (2020) found that fathers' work hours were related to the organizational culture. The expectation of working long hours in a workplace creates what Fried (1998) coined 'overtime culture' (p. 39). Taking parental leave is then seen as time deviant, contradicting the prevailing norms. In Spain, qualitative research has indicated that fathers who are more connected to the workplace and legitimise long working hours take less parental leave (Romero-Balsas et al., 2013). Haas et al. (2002) found evidence that a 'long hours culture' is related to Swedish fathers' parental leave uptake. This overtime culture isn't present to the same extent in every country or company. An

overtime culture is, for example, more prevalent in the US compared to the EU (Schor, 1991). Furthermore, organisations vary regarding the extent of overtime work that is expected from their employees (Mazzetti et al., 2014, 2016).

GENDERED IMPLICATIONS

Given the gendered workplace, organisational experiences differ for men and women. Acker (1990) established that gender cannot be seen as separate from the workplace. The ideal worker in the workplace is seen as a 'hypothetical disembodied worker'. However, workers are not abstract gender-neutral beings. While women are expected to leave the workplace and take up care responsibilities, men are expected to be dedicated to the workplace (Haas & Hwang, 2019a). The male worker, thus, comes closest to the ideal worker (Acker, 1990). The expectations of the committed and dedicated worker affect men and women differently. Research on how the pandemic influenced men's and women's work-home conflict revealed that in organisations with an overtime culture, organisational expectations had a more significant impact on male employees' work-home conflict compared to women's (Žiedelis et al., 2023). The workplace will thus hinder women to a lesser extent compared to men in their pursuit to take up care responsibilities.

The prevailing gendered norms at the workplace and at home disadvantages both fathers and mothers, albeit in a different way. While mothers are penalized on the labour market (e.g., wage rate and hours worked) just because they have a child (Kleven et al., 2019), fathers suffer repercussions when not adhering to the ideal worker norm. When asking for workplace flexibility to take up care responsibilities, fathers receive backlash. Fathers who request parental leave can encounter stigmatization, which casts them as less committed employees (Rudman & Mescher, 2013). Reducing working hours signals a lack of flexibility and results in a 'flexibility stigma' (Coltrane et al., 2013). Moreover, some managers threaten with negative career consequences when fathers want to take up their parental leave (Hennekam et al., 2023; Samtleben et al., 2019). Similarly, some fathers are afraid to work part-time because of negative career consequences (Blair-Loy, 2005; Wharton & Blair-Loy, 2002). Fathers, thus, shorten their leave when workplaces are associated with high costs for taking leave (Bygren & Duvander, 2006). When fathers do take a shorter parental leave, they are still perceived as a good parent (Petts et al., 2022).

I hypothesize that working overtime signals a strong ideal worker norm, and fathers who work overtime will hence limit their parental leave to avoid the negative consequences on their career.

ANALYTICAL DESIGN AND PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

To investigate whether overtime hours predict parental leave uptake, I use employer-employee matched administrative register data from 84,116 firstborn children to both parents, born in Sweden in the year 2010.

Dependent variable: paid parental leave. Paid parental leave is measured as the sum of the annual uptake of leave in the first two calendar years following the birth year of the child. It is registered by the Swedish Social Insurance Agency and the Swedish Public Employment Agency. The Swedish parental leave policy allows for 240 days of paid parental leave to take care of their child. Of those days, 60 days are non-transferable to the other parent, also known as the

fathers' and mothers' quota. The other 180 can be transferred to the other parent (Försäkringskassan, 2023). By having these fathers' and mothers' quota, the Swedish paid parental leave policy encourages fathers to take up parental leave. However, the uptake remains gender unequal.

Independent variable: overtime. Overtime is measured as the monthly hours overtime worked. Data on the hours of overtime work in the year before birth (2009) is collected through a survey in selected organisations and is supplemented with employers' associations that collected overtime data from the companies that were part of their membership. Currently, the dataset contains data from 42,270 blue-collar and 42,270 white-collar workers in the private sector. I identified the number of hours worked overtime in the year before the birth of the child to characterize the workplace culture in which the parents decided how much parental leave they would take. Within the subset of fathers who engaged in overtime work (13% of the fathers), their average overtime amounted to 2.25 hours. Correspondingly, among mothers who partook in overtime work (11% of the mothers), the average overtime worked tally to 1.09 hours. The dataset further includes detailed information on the overtime hours worked not only by the parents, but also by their co-workers within the same workplace and within the entire organisation. This data will be analysed in a later phase.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

In the dataset comprising 84,116 total observations, results showed that fathers on average availed themselves of 78.25 days of parental leave, while mothers used a significantly longer duration of 329.25 days. The share of paid parental leave was calculated. Fathers used an average share of 20%, whereas mothers used 80% of the total parental leave days.

Table 1. Gender inequality in the share of parental leave uptake in relation to working overtime.

Overtime	Parent	
	Father	Mother
Yes	22.12	78.73
No	24.84	78.35

Note. The share of parental leave is written as a percentage.

As seen in Table 1, in couples where fathers worked overtime in the year before the birth of their child, they took 22% of the parental leave, whereas in couples where fathers did not work overtime, they took 25% of the parental leave. Overtime hours seemed to matter to a lesser extent for women. Among couples in which the mother worked overtime in the year before the birth of the child, mothers took 79% of the parental leave, as compared to couples in which the mother did not engage in overtime work, wherein 78% of the leave was taken.

In the upcoming phase of this study, I will conduct multilevel analyses to examine how various factors, including the parents' own overtime, their partner's overtime, workplace-related overtime, and organisational overtime, influence utilization of parental leave.

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