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Employers' Perceptions of Parental Leave of Mothers and Fathers: Penalties Incurred from Gender-Deviating Behavior

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the study is to provide the first European evidence of the gendered penalties employers allot on individuals taking parental leave. As the expectations on parents are clearly gendered in the European context – women are expected to prioritize family over work while men are not – we hypothesize that employers penalize male leave-taking to a greater extent than female leave-taking, even when the leaves are of the same duration. The underlying mechanism we are testing is the penalty a worker derives from deviating from gender expectations. We test our hypothesis by a survey experiment in which we manipulate the length of leave and the gender of the worker being evaluated. To provide a European perspective, we conduct our experiment in both Sweden and Poland. Although the countries are very different in terms of gendered expectations of leave – in which Swedish fathers take around 30 percent of the leave compared to 3 percent in Poland – we expect to find the same underlying mechanism of penalties incurred from deviating from the gender expectation of the particular context. The study will provide new evidence of why the second phase of the gender revolution – men's increases in family work – is progressing so slowly.

INTRODUCTION

The labor market is generally seen as favoring men over women. In studies of the "gendered organization", it has long been assumed that workplace norms are masculine, and the ideal worker is a man (Acker 1990). Since men fulfill the role of the "ideal worker" - an employee who prioritizes work over family – this expectation provides a favorable effect on wages and careers, unrelated to actual behavior. However, this perspective assumes that men behave as employers expect that they will. Only recently have studies been conducted on how men who behave like a "female" worker - i.e., prioritize family life over work through parental leave, part-time work, and shorter family-related absences - are affected by the norm of the "ideal worker" (Munsch 2016; Kasperska, Matysiak & Cukrowska-Torzewska 2023).

The aim of the study is to provide the first European evidence of the gendered penalties employers allot on individuals taking parental leave. As the expectations on parents are clearly gendered in the European context – women are expected to take child-related career breaks while men are not – we hypothesize that employers penalize paternity leave to a greater extent than maternity leave, even when the leaves are of the same duration. Previous survey experiments

conducted in the US have shown mixed results: there is evidence both that men tend to be penalized more than women for the same length of parental leave (Rudman & Mescher 2013) and that the penalty may be the same across the genders (Petts, Mize & Kaufman 2022). In the U.S., however, women's parental leave lengths vary considerably – where ten percent are absent for less than a month, and one-fifth resign to become housewives (Laughlin 2011) – while paternity leave is almost non-existent. For many professions, the recognition of the importance of parents' time with children is equally low for both genders, making it a context in which both men and women are expected to prioritize work over family.

There is a lack of European research on the effects of parental leaves on workers' career outcomes within and between genders. For women, for example, we do not know if the assessment of work commitment differs between parental leave lengths equivalent to the average male leave, the paid leave period, the average female leave, and a long female leave. The same applies to men, where it is unknown whether the assessment of work engagement differs between different leave lengths. Finally, it is unknown if these assessments differ between genders for the same leave lengths, i.e., if a man is penalized more than a woman for a leave of, for example, 6 months. Our hypothesis is that the assessment of work commitment differs relatively little for women, while men are assigned a significantly lower assessment even for short leaves.

Even though different assessments of work engagement for men and women for the same leave length would fall under European anti-discrimination legislation if performed in the workplace (European Parliament 2006) – as men are disadvantaged solely because of their gender – interview studies suggest that men and women do not associate this assessment with gender at all. It is common for men, for example, to state that a manager's demand for a short leave is reasonable given the structure of the job, even though women in the same job and at the same workplace take long maternity leaves (Haas & Hwang 2007, 2019). Contemporary gender theories suggest that one of the main reasons individuals reproduce gender inequality is to 'degender' their choices, i.e., by persisting that their choices are not related to gender (Damingier 2020). Such 'degendering' would explain the persistent attitude-behavior gap in gender found across high-income countries, i.e. that couples with strictly egalitarian gender attitudes exhibit strictly traditional gender divisions of work (Damingier 2020).

DATA AND METHODS

We use experimental research methods, which are well-suited for detecting those unconscious gender norms we describe above (Auspurg and Hinz 2014). The study design is a 4 (lengths of leave) x 2 (gender of leave-taker) paired conjoint experiment. We construct worker profiles based on previous international research (Petts, Mize & Kaufman 2022) adapted to Swedish and Polish conditions. All profiles will be validated in pilot studies before being used in the main study. Pilot studies are conducted with Swedish and Polish respondents via internet platforms such as Prolific and Ariadna panel. All details related to hypotheses and study design will be preregistered before data collection.

The respondents will be managers with supervisory responsibilities. We choose managers because they are the principal decision-makers when it comes to hiring and pay at work. The participants will be randomly assigned a set of workers' profiles which will include information on workers' gender, and experience of career breaks due to parental leave (0, 2, 6 and 12 months) along with information on education, work experience, and skills.

Our outcome variable is “work commitment”. It is, according to previous research, measured as an index consisting of what assessors consider reasonable to expect when the person returns to work. Examples of the included scales validated in previous research are 1) working overtime when needed, 2) arriving at work on time, 3) being absent more than colleagues, with each scale measured on ten-point scales (for a complete list, see Petts, Mize & Kaufman 2022:8).

The data will be collected by two separate research companies - the Swedish Novus “Sweden panel” and the Polish one (selection is in progress). Data collection is done through web surveys in each of the countries. The web panels are randomly recruited, and a lot of work is done to achieve national representativeness. Although the measurement of the causal effect is not dependent on representativeness, recent literature has emphasized the importance of understanding the target population and its potential skew (Lundberg, Johnson & Stewart 2021), as well as that a very skewed target population (especially the previously common convenience sample) leads to dramatically different estimates of the causal effect (Hainmueller, Hangartner & Yamamoto 2015). The web panel is common in previous research (Mize & Manago 2022).

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

The survey will be fielded in February 2024. As the fieldwork for surveys in web panels is generally short and the modelling is straightforward, we expect to be able to produce preliminary results already in March 2024.

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