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# Fathers, Parental Leave Policies, and Infant Quality of Life: International Perspectives and Policy Impact

By  
MARGARET O'BRIEN

Infant care is no longer purely a private family matter. As more mothers return to paid employment in their child's first year, governments develop provisions to support working parents with very young children. Statutory parental leave and flexible working provisions for fathers are expanding rapidly, particularly in Europe. The author compares fathers' patterns of leave-taking across twenty-four countries from 2003 to 2007 to present new types of father-care-sensitive leave models. Findings show that fathers' use of statutory leave is greatest when high income replacement (50 percent or more of earnings) is combined with extended duration (more than fourteen days). Father-targeted schemes heighten usage. Although studies are limited, parental leave has the potential to boost fathers' emotional investment in and connection with infants. Differential access to statutory leave raises the possibility of a new polarization for infants: being born into either a parental-leave-rich or -poor household and, indeed, country.

**Keywords:** parental leave; paternity leave; working parents; child care; fatherhood; infants

There is no finer investment for any community than putting milk into babies.

—Winston Churchill (1943, cited in *The Complete Speeches* [1974])

Across the world, investment in parental leave schemes to support the early weeks and months of childhood has become a focus of public policy. Countries and states are introducing innovative measures increasingly targeted at employed fathers as well as employed mothers (Moss and Deven 2006; O'Brien, Brandth, and Kvande 2007). Since the introduction of the ten

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paid “daddy days” by Olaf Palme’s Swedish Social Democratic government in 1974, other governments have begun supporting paternity leave for the earliest period of children’s lives. From the mid-1990s, Europe in particular has witnessed an acceleration of explicitly father-targeted policies, with experimentation in incentive and penalty-based measures (e.g., Brandth and Kvande 2002; Liera 2002). By 2007, sixty-six nations had a paid entitlement to paternity leave or a parental leave provision to which fathers had access (Heymann, Earle, and Hayes 2007).

This article analyzes the diverse patterns of evolving father-sensitive schemes, mainly in European countries, but also in Australia and Canada. It scopes the goals and range of the policies; analyzes usage data; and examines the evidence on how fathers’ parenting, through their use of paternity and parental leave, contributes to infant quality of life. The article adopts an integrated ecological-parental capital theory approach (Pleck 2007). This conceptual framework enhances understanding about how macro public policy measures, such as paternity leave or flexible working schedules, operate to facilitate infants’ and children’s access to men’s parental resources. To what extent does a country’s parental leave regime facilitate optimal infant quality of life? In terms of the classic father involvement construct, men’s take-up of paternity leave, parental leave, and flexible working practices is a form of paternal availability with the potential for direct proximal paternal interaction (Lamb et al. 1987) or paternal capital (implicit in social capital theory approaches, e.g., Coleman 1988). Furthermore, if the parental leave measure is job-protected and income-reimbursed, it ensures a continued flow of financial capital into the household. As such, inclusion of both parents in early years’ parental leave schemes is a strong example of a child-centered social investment strategy (Esping-Andersen 2002). This form of investment strategy has the potential to deliver the economic and social benefit of preventative interventions, thereby promoting and protecting child well-being. Informal care by kin and intimate others can also contribute to child well-being, but the focus here is on public policies targeted at the child’s parents.

The article also discusses unintended risks associated with parental leave policy innovations. For instance, it is possible that differential access to father-sensitive leave could further polarize children’s start in life. A privileged group of infants will commence life in *parental-leave-rich households* with high access to maternal, paternal, and financial capital. By contrast, another group of infants enter into disadvantaged *parental-leave-poor households* with comparatively less emotional and economic investment available in their daily life. Policy makers might keep in mind the issue of equity and social justice in relation to access.

## Fathers and Parental Leave Measures

The development of father-care-sensitive parental leave measures has been driven by a mix of societal changes; key among them is the increased number of mothers who return to paid employment in their child’s first year. For instance,

recent analysis has shown that 50 percent of American mothers have returned to employment by the time their child is three months of age (Hofferth and Curtin 2006). Fathers' access to parental leave has been historically sponsored by differing stakeholders and policy agendas, depending on national context. Significant actors and policy settings include personnel and human resource departments, trades unions, government and civic society organizations, labor market policies, gender equity policies, fertility policies, and child welfare policies.

The European Union has been a vital organizational body for formulating work-family reconciliation frameworks. The EU Directive on Parental Leave in 1996, which set a minimum standard of three months' job-protected, unpaid parental leave for all employees across Europe, was a hallmark piece of legislation. Its genesis was more than a decade earlier within the European Commission's Action Programme on Equal Opportunities (Article 1), and it took three years to implement (Cohen 1999). Although its primary intent and formulation was "to enable women and men to reconcile their occupational, family and upbringing responsibilities arising from the care of children," its lack of sensitivity to gender income differentials contributed to an initial weakness and uneven implementation.

Twenty years earlier, when Sweden initiated parental leave, child well-being was higher on its national policy agenda. Officials enshrined the principles of child well-being, gender equality through women's economic independence, and men's involvement in family life into policy. As Hass and Hwang (1999, 49) report when reflecting on the roots of the Swedish parental leave approach,

The first goal concerns the well-being of children. Since the 1930s, Sweden has been concerned about creating a society where people want to have children and where children are well cared for. . . . The most important condition for children's well-being is families' economic stability. Parental leave is seen as guaranteeing that people can have children and return to their jobs without adverse consequences, thus ensuring children's well-being. Children are also seen as benefiting psychologically from mothers and fathers being home with them during their first months of life, without parents feeling economic stress from unemployment. Swedish children have a legal right to have a relationship with both parents, and fathers' ability to take parental leave is one way men can develop their relationship with their children.

Despite these initial ideals, the politics of parental leave continues unabated in Sweden (Björnberg 2004) particularly in relation to how couples in intimate relationships manage self-fulfillment and altruism, potentially conflicting principles intrinsic to parental leave decision making.

More generally, parental leave policies have continuously evolved. Their implementation is responsive to local political and cultural agendas and more global processes such as work intensification, flexible labor markets, and emerging child well-being norms. Most recently, awareness of quality of life beyond employment, leisure needs, health impacts of long working hours, and children's rights to parental time have become potent factors in the mix (Kamerman and Moss forthcoming).

## Conceptualizing Paternity Leave and Fathers' Access to Parental Leave

The social policy literature has well-established, albeit contested, sets of concepts with which to categorize and theorize the relationship between national state systems and labor market activity (e.g., Liera 2002). Many historic typologies have assumed a dichotomous breadwinner male worker and female homemaker-carer model of the family, leaving little conceptual space to understand how men provide care or how national state systems can support or hinder men's engagement in care of children or elders. As Finch (2006, 119) reflects, "By concentrating on the extent to which states unburden the main carer (i.e. women) to undertake paid work, the extent to which states unburden the main breadwinner (i.e. men) to undertake care is ignored."

Since the late 1990s, a dual-carer/dual-earner family model has become more common (e.g., Gornick and Meyers 2003), as have more caring and nurturing "family man" normative aspirations (e.g., Coltrane 1996; Day et al. 2004). How are different national systems recognizing caring activities by fathers in families? Do they provide statutory leave for fathers at the time of a child's birth (paternity leave) or later, in the early years of a child's life (parental leave)? A father focus is timely as the complexity, scope, and speed of policy change in this area is striking.

An important new evidence base is the annually updated audit of leave policies and leave behavior prepared by national experts of the International Network on Leave Policy and Research (Deven and Moss 2005; Moss and O'Brien 2006; Moss and Wall 2007). This network currently covers twenty-four affluent countries, predominantly in Europe and in other English-speaking nations including Australia, Canada, and the United States. It peer-reviews analyses of detailed changes in maternity, paternity, parental leave, and related public policies each year. This article presents a comparative analysis of paternity leave and parental leave provision for fathers across twenty-four countries, primarily between 2003 and 2007, drawing on the evidence base provided by the three international audits in 2005, 2006, and 2007.<sup>1</sup>

### Statutory Father-Care-Sensitive Leave Models: A New Typology

*Paternity leave* and *parental leave* are sometimes used interchangeably, although technically they relate to distinct time periods. In several countries, parental leave is used to subsume paternity leave, a conflation that occurs more commonly as leave arrangements are becoming more complex. Each national or regional jurisdiction has its own formal definition (Moss and Deven 1999); however, at a very basic level, paternity leave can be considered a statutory entitlement to enable a

TABLE 1  
STATUTORY FATHER-CARE-SENSITIVE LEAVE  
MODELS BY SELECTED COUNTRIES

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- |    |  |
|----|--|
| 1. | Extended father-care leave with high income replacement: Finland, Germany, Iceland, Norway, Portugal, Quebec, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden                  |
| 2. | Short father-care leave with high income replacement: Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Greece, Hungary, the Netherlands                               |
| 3. | Short/minimalist father-care leave with low/no income replacement: Australia, Austria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Ireland, Italy, Poland, United Kingdom |
| 4. | No statutory father-care sensitive parental leave: United States   |
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SOURCE: Peter Moss, "Policies to Increase Fathers' Use of Leave," Network Presentation, Budapest, Hungary, 2007; Moss and Wall (2007); Moss and O'Brien (2006).

father to be absent from work for a period of time when a child is born. By contrast, parental leave is a statutory entitlement to be absent from work after early maternity and paternity leave.

Table 1 presents a new typology of the diverse forms of current statutory provisions in the twenty-four countries to enable fathers to exercise caring responsibilities and obligations at and around childbirth and in the subsequent early years of a child's life. The concept of *father-care-sensitive leave* is adopted to signify that the leave period formally allows fathers to be away from the workplace to undertake child and partner care obligations rather than engage in economic breadwinning functions. In countries where leave is paid, fathers are of course also able to continue economically contributing to the household.

Paternity leave and men's access to parental leave are considered together to create the typology. Two dimensions provide the main organizing framework:

- *Leave duration*: the amount of time fathers are allowed away from the workplace. *Extended* time covers those provisions of more than fourteen days in all. *Short* time is reserved for countries where time away from the workplace is 14 days or less. The cutoff of fourteen days is intended to reflect the range of time currently available to fathers in this twenty-four-country sample and may alter in future analysis, as provision expands or contracts. The dichotomy is a relative one and sensitive to parental status—for instance, the term *extended leave* is generally applied to maternity leave periods of one year or more.
- *Level of income replacement*: the extent to which a country provides income substitution during the leave period. Moss's (2007, 66) distinction between high and low income replacement levels is adopted. *High income replacement* is defined as an entitlement paid to all eligible fathers at 50 percent or more of earnings (in most cases to a maximum ceiling). *Low income replacement* is defined as an entitlement paid to all eligible fathers either at a low flat rate, or earnings related at less than 50 percent of earnings, or for less than the full period of leave.

When paternity leave and parental leave provision for fathers across the twenty-four countries are mapped out in relation to their duration and the extent of income replacement, four main models are identified (Table 1).

*Extended father-care leave with high income replacement*

This group covers eight countries and one Canadian province, Quebec. It represents the “premier league” of governmental provision for fathers to care. All except Germany and Iceland have both a paternity and a parental leave scheme. For both types of leave, levels of income replacement are generally high. In each case, fathers have an option<sup>2</sup> to take parental leave; in some countries, this period is reserved for fathers only and cannot be transferred to mothers. In the case of Norway, the bounded time is linked to a use-it-or-lose-it system: if the time is not taken by the father, the family loses it (a combined bonus/penalty arrangement). This ring-fencing device is designed to create clarity and incentives for use.

In most countries, the extended father-care leave model has been developed as an additional support to families with young children and has not involved taking leave away from mothers. The group includes the well-established father-sensitive regimes embedded in the majority, but not all, of the Nordic countries; and the recently enhanced schemes from countries as diverse as Germany, Portugal, Spain, and Slovenia. For all countries in this group, fathers are able to access time away from work around the birth of a child, although in some cases, for instance, Iceland, this leave is not formally called paternity leave.

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Within Nordic countries, one of the most innovative father-targeted leave entitlements so far developed, in terms of combined time and economic compensation (80 percent of prior salary), is Iceland's (Einarsdóttir and Pétursdóttir 2007). In 2000, the Icelandic government introduced a total of nine months' paid postbirth leave (to be taken in the first eighteen months) organized into three parts: three months for mothers (nontransferable), three months for fathers (nontransferable), and three months that could be transferred between parents as they choose. In addition, thirteen weeks of unpaid parental leave are available each year for each parent. The radical nature of this national measure has created intense public debate. As one of Iceland's central civil servants notes, “Probably, there have never been more Icelandic fathers active in caring for their children



than there are today" (Gíslason 2007, 15). Others are more circumspect, although new longitudinal evidence is forthcoming (Eydal forthcoming).

More recent arrivals to this group include countries that are devoting higher than average provision to fathers driven by a diverse set of nation-specific immediate factors. For instance, in Portugal, a tipping point has resulted from a combination of high levels of dual-earner full-time couple households linked to a new government gender equality political agenda (Wall 2007). This led to the introduction of a compulsory five-day paternity leave and two "daddy weeks" of parental leave with 100 percent compensation of earnings. The Portuguese extra daddy days are temporally linked to the end of paternity leave or the end of maternity leave. Wall (2007) suggests that, along with 100 percent income compensation and a relatively short maternity leave scheme, this model promotes a quick return to the labor market by both parents.

The impetus to activate and/or support dual-earner parents is also evident in Spain's recent new law on gender equality, approved in March 2007, which created an enhanced provision. For the first time, this southern European country has introduced fifteen days of paid paternity leave while also extending paid coverage for mothers in its maternity leave provision.

From January 2007, Germany too has radically broken with a leave policy that in the past supported mothers alone to stay out of the labor market for three years after the birth of a child. The government added two highly paid months for fathers onto a shorter twelve-month maternity leave period. These daddy months operate in the influential Norwegian incentive based manner. Finland's father's month works under a similar incentive scheme (Salmi, Lami-Taskula, and Takala 2007). To make up a month, fathers need to use the last two weeks of parental leave, typically taken by mothers and usually ending when the child is about six months old, earlier than in Germany.

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practices. It is clear, within Europe at least, that the incorporation of fathers into work-family reconciliation policies is no longer the province of liberal or left-of-center political parties. The new approach in Germany has been spearheaded by the Christian Democrat right-of-center coalition government, extending earlier Red-Green coalition proposals. Erler and Erler (2007) argue that the proposals are a radical paradigm-breaking parental leave package, provoked by low fertility trends, with the purpose of promoting a new dual-carer/dual-earner family model in Germany. The father incentive element is but one component in an acceleration of support for dual-earning parents in Germany, a country with a traditional late school entry for children (seven years) and low maternal employment.

Governmental concern about low fertility has also been an influential factor in the development of a new father-enhanced parental leave package introduced in 2001 by Slovenia, which has a 1.2 Total Period Fertility (Stropnik 2007). In 2001, fathers were given an individual quota of ninety days with a high income replacement level. The mechanism of introduction has been gradual (fifteen days—January 2003; forty-five days—January 2004; ninety days—January 2005) with an explicit initial temporal constraint on fathers to take fifteen days within a child's first six months, after a fifteen-day paternity leave period.

Outside Europe, Quebec provides a further example of an extended father-care leave scheme with high income replacement (Doucet and Tremblay 2007). In contrast to the rest of Canada, this province has recently introduced a more generous parental leave package for fathers and mothers, extending paternity leave and offering a father's quota, as well as providing greater flexibility and higher income replacement levels to mothers. It appears that the influence of European cultural norms with regard to work-family arrangements continue to shape Quebec's public policy approach to parental leave.

### *Short father-care leave with high income replacement*

This model of father-care leave provision is characterized by high income replacement but for short periods of time. All six countries have a statutory entitlement to a paternity leave period reimbursed at 100 percent of the father's salary or equivalent, ranging from two days (Greece) to fourteen days (Denmark, France). In all cases, eligible fathers have access to parental leave, but there are no father-targeted leave entitlements<sup>3</sup> as found in the first model. For several countries, the development of paternity leave is a relatively recent innovation, implemented without significant alteration to mother-centered parental leave traditions (e.g., Greece, Hungary).

### *Short/minimalist father-care leave with low/no income replacement*

This model of father-care leave provision is characterized by short or minimal father-care leave with low/no income replacement. The majority of the group has no statutory paternity leave, although two countries (Estonia, United

Kingdom) have recently introduced the provision at low income replacement levels. In all countries, fathers have access to parental leave,<sup>4</sup> but none except Italy has father-targeted leave entitlements. Australia is included in this model as an exemplar of minimalist father-care (and indeed mother-care) leave as all employees have statutory access to fifty-two weeks' job-protected family leave across the federation of six states (Alexander, Whitehouse, and Brennan 2007; Whitehouse, Diamond, and Baird 2007).

Generally a more "caring" rather than solely economic father role assumption began emerging later in these countries' governmental policies than in the majority of countries in the two previous models. In the United Kingdom, this policy turn coincided with the end of eighteen years of Conservative government and the rise of a Labour government in 1997. The Labour Party initiated an explicit rather than implicit family policy agenda with an emphasis on the caring and economic responsibilities both parents held in common. One stated early objective of the policy was "to extend choice for both mothers and fathers by giving them the chance to spend more time at home, as well as support their children financially" (Department of Health 1999, 26). By 2003, this historically strong breadwinner model country launched a two-week paid paternity leave statutory period, albeit at a low flat rate reimbursement by other European standards. As Patricia Hewitt, secretary of state for trade and industry and minister for women at the time, stated in a keynote speech, "Father inclusiveness is part of a modern family policy" (Hewitt 2004). Currently, the U.K. government's ambition is to introduce (no later than May 2010, or within the life of the current Parliament) a new right for fathers to take up to six months' Additional Paternity Leave (APL) if the mother returns to work before the end of her maternity leave (O'Brien and Moss 2008). If the mother has some of her maternity pay remaining, this resource can be transferred to the father. At the present time, British mothers receive 90 percent income reimbursement for the first six weeks of their fifty-two weeks' maternity leave followed by a low flat rate until about the nine-month point. The proposed new father right would be introduced alongside an extension of maternity leave pay (rate yet undecided) to the full year.

Unlike the other father-care-sensitive models, the British approach to extended care (APL) involves taking leave away from mothers to give to fathers, although the simultaneous extension of maternity leave to one year goes against this trend somewhat. Perhaps not surprisingly, implementation of APL is proving complex.

### *No statutory father-care-sensitive parental leave*

The tendency until recently in countries such as the United States, in contrast to many European countries, is to encourage informal and private solutions for the care of infants and children. Unlike the other twenty-three countries considered, the United States has not developed a national statutory father-care-sensitive parental leave package.

Since 1993, however, American parents working in the public sector or in the private sector with more than fifty employees are eligible to twelve weeks' unpaid leave after childbirth (along with several other medical or family reasons) under the federal Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) (Kamerman and Waldfogel 2006). This provision is wide-ranging, giving no special treatment to maternal or paternal care of infants. Indeed, its roots were in protecting workers with disabling conditions, a reason for excluding it from the third minimalist short/minimalist father-care leave model.

More recently, a minority of states are authorizing a dedicated provision for infant care. For example, in 2002, California pioneered the first paid family leave law in the United States, enabling eligible parents to take six weeks' post-natal leave at about 55 percent of salary reimbursement but still under the rubric of Temporary Disability Insurance (TDI) (Grant, Hatcher, and Patel 2005). During the past decade, several American states have developed At Home Infant Care (AHIC) policies (Grant, Hatcher, and Patel 2005). In 2007, Washington State became the first non-TDI state in the nation to pass a paid leave program to give family members (including fathers) time off to care for new babies (Earle and Heymann, personal communication March 2008).

## Fathers' Usage of Paternity and Parental Leave

Tables 2 through 5 present trend data across the twenty-four countries on fathers' use of statutory paternity and parental leave, typically for the period 2003 to 2007. The findings are organized by the four father-care-sensitive leave models. In many cases, countries do not keep administrative records of leave usage by fathers, so national audits have used survey samples when available. It is notable that the most detailed information is found in those countries operating under an extended father-care leave with high income replacement model.

### *Main observations*

- Fathers' usage of both paternity and parental leave is highest under the extended father-care leave with high income replacement model, lowest under the short/minimalist father-care leave with low/no income replacement model, and intermediate under the short father-care leave with high income replacement model.
- Fathers' use of leave is heightened when high income replacement is combined with father-targeted or reserved schemes. The audit shows that on average over 70 percent of eligible fathers take some form of leave under these conditions.
- Father-targeted or reserved schemes enhance fathers' usage rates. Blocks of time that are labeled "daddy days" or "father's quota" are attractive to men and their partners. Put another way, discretionary/optional leave schemes, even with high income replacement, have lower levels of usage by fathers.
- Fathers will take longer extended leave periods when there is high income replacement.
- "Gender-neutral" parental leave schemes that implicitly, rather than explicitly, include fathers do not appear to promote greater father involvement. At this point fathers (and their partners) may need more explicit labeling to legitimize paternal access to the care of infants and children.

TABLE 2  
EXTENDED FATHER-CARE LEAVE WITH HIGH INCOME REPLACEMENT

	Data Sources <sup>a</sup>	Paternity Leave	Usage by Eligible Fathers <sup>b</sup>	Trends <sup>b</sup>	Parental Leave	Usage by Eligible Fathers <sup>b</sup>	Trends <sup>b</sup>
Finland	Salmi, Lami-Taskula, and Takala (2007)	18 days; 70% of annual earnings to ceiling	2005, 70%	1993, 46%; 2000, 63%	"Father's Month"; 70% of annual earnings to ceiling	2005, 89%	2001, 2%
Germany	Erlar and Erler (2007)	No statutory paternity leave	—	—	Two months; 67% of annual earnings to ceiling	January-March 2007, 8.5%	2006, 3.5%
Iceland	Einarsdóttir Peturdóttir (2007); Gíslason (2007)	See parental leave section			3 months' father-only period, plus access to a joint 3-month period.; 80% of annual earnings to ceiling	2006, 90%; 2005, 53% of available days; 95:179, average number of father/mother days	Proportion of available days: 2001, 21%; 2002, 36%; 2003, 53%; 2004, 53%
Norway	Brandth and Kvalde (2006)	2 weeks; "Daddy Days" (unpaid)	89%		6 weeks' father's quota; 100% of annual earnings to ceiling, or 80% for a longer period	2007, 90%	1997, 4%; 2003, 70%; 2006, 89%
Portugal	Wall (2007)	5 days; 100% of earnings	2005, 39%	2002, 26%	15 "Daddy Days"; 100% of earnings	2005, 30%	2002, 14%

(continued)

TABLE 2 (continued)

	Data Sources <sup>a</sup>	Paternity Leave	Usage by Eligible Fathers <sup>b</sup>	Trends <sup>b</sup>	Parental Leave	Usage by Eligible Fathers <sup>b</sup>	Trends <sup>b</sup>
Quebec	Doucet and Tremblay (2007)	3 weeks at 75% of average weekly income, or 5 weeks at 70%			55 weeks at 70% average weekly income to ceiling or 40 weeks at 75%	2006, 40%	2004, 22%
Slovenia	Stropnik (2007)	15 days; 100% of average earnings (from 2003)	2005, 66%	2003, 63%; 2004, 72%	90 days; 100% of average earnings for the first 15 days, after which a lower flat ceiling	2003, 2.2%	1995, 0.75%; 1999, 0.6%
Spain	Escobedo (2007)	15 days; 100% of earnings from the third day	N/A		Unpaid entitlement until the child reaches 3 years	2005, 4.5%	1995, 1.7%
Sweden	Chronholm, Haas, and Hwang (2007)	10 days; 80% of earnings to ceiling	80% (average 9.7 days)		60 days	1998, 90% (mainly when child is 13-15 months); fathers tend to take leave in part weeks	1987, 7% of total leave days; 2005, 19.5%; 2006, 20.6%

a. Current Paternity Leave and Parental Leave provision as cited by authors of country reports in Moss and Wall (2007); Ingólfur Gíslason (personal communication, 2007).

b. Deven and Moss (2005); Moss and O'Brien (2006); Moss and Wall (2007).

TABLE 3  
SHORT FATHER-CARE LEAVE WITH HIGH INCOME REPLACEMENT

	Data Sources	Paternity Care	Usage	Trends	Parental Leave	Usage	Trends
Belgium	Merla and Deven (2007)	10 days; 100% of earnings for days 1-3, 82% days 4-10	2004 "large majority"	N/A	3 months; High income replacement for full-time option only	2005, 17%	N/A
Canada	Doucet and Tremblay (2007)	4 days; unpaid	N/A	N/A	35 weeks; 55% of average earnings	2005, 14.5%	2000, 3%; 2001, 10%; 2004, 11%
Denmark	Rostgaard (2006)	Two weeks; 100% of earnings	Official data combine paternity and parental leave (child is unit of analysis)	N/A	32 weeks; High income replacement to ceiling	2002/2003, 62% children born had father who took leave; 25:351, average number of father/mother days	N/A
France	Fagnani and Boyer (2007)	14 days; 100% of earnings	2003, 66%	N/A	3 years; Moderate income replacement plus child benefit	2003 "low"	N/A
Greece	Kazassi (2007)	2 days; 100% of earnings	N/A	N/A	3 years; unpaid	N/A	N/A
Hungary	Korintus (2007)	5 days; 100% of average daily earnings	N/A	N/A	3 years; 70% earnings if insured	2005 "low"	N/A
Netherlands	Groenendijk and Keuzenkamp (2007)	2 days; 100% of earnings	2004, 90% take leave after birth (51% take statutory leave)	N/A	Time linked to hours previously worked; Low income replacement	2006, 19%	2006, 16%

TABLE 4  
SHORT/MINIMALIST FATHER-CARE LEAVE WITH LOW/NO INCOME REPLACEMENT

Data Sources	Paternity Leave	Usage	Trends	Parental Leave	Usage	Trends
Australia	Alexander, Whitehouse, and Brennan (2007)	No statutory paternity leave	2003/2004, 83% take nonstatutory leave after birth (25% take employer paid leave)	N/A	52 weeks; unpaid	N/A
Austria	Rille-Pfeiffer (2007)	No statutory paternity leave	—	—	Until child is 2 years; Variable to low income replacement plus child benefit	2006, 3.5% 1991, 0.6%; 2005, 2%
Czech Republic	Kourková (2007)	No statutory paternity leave	—	—	Until child is 3 years; 40% average earnings (from 2008)	2006, 1.4% 2001, 0.77; 2003, 0.99
Estonia	Pall (2007)	14 days; 4.2 € daily	2007, 14%	N/A	Until child is 3 years; Variable to low income replacement	2007, 1% 2001, 0.7; 2003, 0.9
Ireland	Drew (2007)	No statutory paternity leave	—	—	14 weeks; unpaid	N/A
Italy	Giovanni (2007)	3 months' optional leave if mother dies, leaves, or becomes severely ill; 80% of earnings (no ceiling)	N/A	N/A	6 months plus 1 month of optional leave (30% of earnings)	N/A
Poland	Kotowska and Michon (2007)	No statutory paternity leave	—	—	Until child is 3 years; Low flat rate; Fathers eligible from 1996	2005, 2.5% N/A
United Kingdom	O'Brien and Moss (2007)	2 weeks; 165 € weekly (from 2003)	2005, 93% take leave after birth (50% take statutory leave)	2000, 61%; 2002, 95%	13 weeks; unpaid	2005, 8% N/A



TABLE 5  
NO STATUTORY FATHER-CARE-SENSITIVE LEAVE

	Data Source	Paternity Leave	Usage	Trends	Parental Leave	Usage	Trends
United States	Kamerman and Waldfogel (2006)	No statutory paternity leave	2001, 89% take nonstatutory leave after birth <sup>a</sup>	—	No statutory parental leave	—	—

a. Nepomnyaschy and Waldfogel (2007) ECLS-B national survey. No data on payment. Sixty-four percent take one week or less.

- Governments are conducting numerous policy experiments with the timing of father's leave. Two peaks have appeared: leave time around the birth of a child and leave time linked to mothers' return to employment (later in Nordic countries—eleven to fifteen months—but earlier in other European countries).

*Diversity and income issues*

- County-level eligibility criteria (e.g., length of continuous service) restrict access to parental leave for many fathers and mothers. Significant excluded groups include those with insecure or unstable labor market histories prior to a child's birth (over-represented by low-income and immigrant families). Countries rarely keep child-level data, but Danish records show only 55 percent of children born in 2002 and 2003 have a mother and father who *both* took leave (Rostgaard 2006). Population exposure to father leave is higher in countries with a lower threshold of entitlement (e.g., Sweden).
- Lower take-up rates by fathers in less secure and poorly regulated occupations indicate the significance of financial loss as a disincentive. Reporting on an early survey of paternal leave-taking in the United Kingdom, Bell, McKee, and Priestly (1983, 6) comment that for poorer men the "cost of fatherhood" is high.
- A socioeconomic profiling of fathers' use of leave indicates higher rates are generally associated with high income occupations (self and partner), high levels of education (self and partner), and public sector occupations (self and partner).
- In countries with no statutory father-care-sensitive parental leave, taking time away from employment is more difficult for low-income fathers. Nepomnyaschy and Waldfogel's (2007) community study shows that that the likelihood of taking the longer leave (two or more weeks) was associated with fathers being U.S.-born, more educated, and in middle- or high-prestige jobs.
- Countries with high statutory income replacement father-care policies may promote gender equality but reinforce income inequalities, as cash transfers are being made to families that are already well-paid. This risk of greater economic polarization between *parental-leave rich* and *parental-leave poor households* can be offset by distributive tax policies (e.g., higher tax for wealthier households, a fiscal strategy only acceptable in some countries).

Overall, the evidence highlights the importance of a country's policy framework, particularly financial incentives and father-targeting, in shaping fathers' propensity to take parental leave. In the absence of formal paid job-protected

leave, poorer and less economically secure fathers may be less able to spend time with their infants and partners in the transition to parenthood. It is possible that, from the earliest period of life, infants in poor households experience less paternal investment than infants in more affluent households.

## Fathers' Use of Leave and Its Influence on the Lives of Infants and Children

What are the benefits of fathers' leave-taking? The substantial historical debate has centered on the likely efficacy of various public policy proposals meant to stimulate paternal involvement in the care and well-being of children. The logic has been that giving fathers the opportunity to spend more time at home through reduced working hours or leave after childbirth should result in their being more involved in child caretaking tasks in the future. Until recently, however, little evidence has indicated that the inclusion of fathers in work-family policy initiatives influences behavioral change or child outcomes.

### *Methodological issues*

Attempts to understand the impact of parental leave policies on child well-being should involve three important methodological considerations. First, internationally parental leave is a black box of diverse arrangements. Similar entitlements do not necessarily mean similar levels of exposure to the entitlement. Second, parental leave is part of a matrix of public investment in children. As such, it can be difficult to disentangle the effect of parental leave policies from, for instance, total GDP devoted to child welfare. Third, surprisingly little empirical research shows what parents do during parental leave (even less on what fathers do) (Seward et al. 2006; Haas and Hwang 2008), and as such, policy makers are not clear on how parental leave may operate to promote child well-being. Despite Nordic innovatory research (e.g., Haas 1992), empirical enquiry into the specific personal and family experiences and impact of maternal, paternal, and paternity leave is still relatively undeveloped. Where impact research does exist, the focus has mainly been on the effects of maternity leave.

### *Infant mortality and morbidity gains*

Ruhm (2000) and Tanaka (2005) have conducted large-scale secondary analyses of parental leave arrangements and child health outcomes for sixteen European and eighteen of the thirty countries in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), respectively. In both programs of work, where the subject of inquiry has been on maternal rather than paternal leave-taking, reductions in infant mortality and morbidity have been associated with parental leave.

Tanaka's analysis, which attempted to control for some confounding variables, in particular national investment in child welfare, found a positive independent effect for paid parental leave on specific child health outcomes, notably infant mortality. The strongest effect was on post-neonatal infant mortality (twenty-eight days to one year) when compared to neonatal mortality (under twenty-eight days), suggesting that parental availability to care beyond the first month may be an important parenting practice to enhance child outcomes. Further positive gains were indicated for immunization. The particular features of parental leave provision that were most significant in promoting child welfare were difficult to disentangle, but the secondary analysis suggests that, internationally, positive child effects of parental leave are maximized when the leave is paid and provided in a job-secure context.

### *Breastfeeding*

Secondary analyses of national data sets also show that job-protected paid parental (mostly maternal) leave is associated with higher rates of breastfeeding (e.g., Galtry 2003; Ruhm 2000). In a cross-national analysis, Galtry (2003) traces onset and duration of breastfeeding patterns and finds that duration of breastfeeding is the more sensitive to parental leave provision. For example, in Sweden, 73 percent of mothers were still breastfeeding at six months, compared with 29 percent and 28 percent of American and British mothers, respectively.

### *Parental perceptions of benefits*

In terms of fathers, the evidence to date (primarily Nordic) focuses on men's experiences of paternity leave, parental leave, and flexible work schedules and does not always independently track child outcomes. For example, research has shown that Swedish fathers who use a higher proportion of leave than average (20 percent or more of all potential leave days) appear, at least in the short term, to sustain more engaged family commitment, work fewer hours, and are more involved in child care tasks and household work (Haas and Hwang 1999). Similarly, Huttunen's (1996) survey of Finnish fathers who had taken parental leave found that the opportunity it gave to develop a closer relationship with infants was valued most by the fathers. Norwegian research suggests that fathers who take the "daddy quota" in a "home alone" manner become more aware of the rhythms of and "slow time" than those who take parental leave with their partner (Brandth and Kvande 2001). Brandth and Kvande's (2002) research found a complex process of couple negotiation and bargaining influenced by couple values and preferences as well workplace and economic factors. The couple relationship is a key one, setting the scene against which parents negotiate and balance their family and employment roles and responsibilities.

Two recent father-focused studies build on this earlier body of work by conducting large-scale secondary analyses of longitudinal nationally representative samples, enabling statistical control for some confounding variables such as

paternal prebirth commitment. Using the U.K. Millennium Cohort Study, covering a large birth cohort of children at age eight to twelve months, Tanaka and Waldfogel (2007) find that taking leave and working shorter hours are related to fathers being more involved with the baby and that policies affect both these aspects of fathers' employment behavior. They examine fathers' involvement in four specific types of activities: being the main caregiver, changing diapers, feeding the baby, and getting up during the night. Analysis showed that fathers who took leave (any leave) after the birth were 25 percent more likely to change diapers and 19 percent more likely to feed and to get up at night when the child was age eight to twelve months. In addition, higher working hours for fathers was associated with lower levels of father involvement. The authors conclude that policies that provide parental leave or shorter work hours could promote greater father involvement with infants but caution against definitive causality claims.

Nepomnyaschy and Waldfogel (2007) find a similar association between paternal leave-taking and later higher levels of father involvement, but only for those fathers able to take two weeks' leave or more. The positive relationship between longer duration of leave-taking and greater participation in caring for the child was maintained after controls for a range of selectivity factors including indicators of paternal prebirth commitment (attendance at antenatal classes and the birth itself).

The findings from these two studies suggest that paternal leave-taking has the potential to boost fathers' practical and emotional investment in infant care. Further follow-ups and direct assessments of child well-being and the influence of maternal leave-taking are required to reveal underlying mechanisms at play (e.g., Dex and Ward 2007). Fathers' leave-taking cannot be seen in isolation or in purely quantitative terms as it is embedded in a complex web of parenting styles, parental work practices, infant behavior, and wider socioeconomic factors. Paid parental leave, in particular when parents are sure of employment on return to work, can create a more financially secure context for caring.

## Parental Leave Policies and a Good Quality of Infant Life

Specification of the dimensions of a good quality of life for an infant is fraught with political dilemmas and economic considerations and reflects the models of optimal infant development dominant in any one culture at a particular historical juncture. As Waldfogel (2006, 180) states, "The tensions between respecting choice, promoting quality, and supporting employment are higher in the first few years of life than at any other period." Infant life has not traditionally been considered the province of social policy, possibly because of a historic gendered assumption that only mothers can provide the permitting circumstances. Policy analysis of quality of life indicators for children has concentrated mainly on the postinfancy child (Bradshaw, Hoelscher, and Richardson 2007). An explicit review of the infancy period is important, however, to explore any hypothetical benefits of parental leave or leave from employment to care. In

the field of parental leave policies, the focus has not so much been on the state of infancy *per se* but on the parenting or carer processes perceived as necessary for infant life.

Contemporary hallmarks of a “good” infancy depend to some extent on cultural factors and the theoretical models of psychologists or sociologists. Psychologists tend to research the personal characteristics of the parents in providing the care environment such as their parenting style, whereas sociologists pay more attention to resource and community influences on child development. An ecological-parental capital approach (Pleck 2007) requires a multilayered and multidimensional framework, attempting to incorporate governmental, community, family, and individual levels for understanding infancy.

In the ecological context of early childhood and parental employment, the quality of life that infants experience is made up of a complex set of processes and resources. The daily life of the infant is organized around regular feeding on six to eight (or more) occasions in a twenty-four-hour cycle, holding, soothing, diaper changing, bathing, dressing, as well as sociable interaction, in between regular phases of infant sleeping. In this highly dependent phase of childhood, the infant needs at least one carer (not necessarily the same person, although cultural norms vary) to be physically close. A century of psychological research shows that the nature of adult care (in particular its sensitivity, stability, and attentiveness) fosters infant sociability, although parental time availability is not associated linearly with the quality of emergent human relationships (Pleck and Masciadrelli 2003). At a more distal level, the infant needs economic care for material resources. In essence, an adequate quality of infant life requires both economic and emotional investment.

A new tension in many contemporary societies is how employed parents manage to accommodate 24/7 infant care within a 24/7 globalized working environment. Dilemmas are negotiated against a background of changing cultural norms concerning the appropriate time for employed mothers to return to work after childbirth. By the 1990s, it has become more common for women to take shorter postbirth employment breaks, particularly in the United States (Waldfogel 2006), although great variability exists within and between countries. In these times of cultural flux, parents deploy diverse parenting and employment strategies contingent on their available external resources and internal capacities. The trade-off between time, money, and care involves intense personal negotiations within the family, the workplace, and increasingly with paid carers as infant care is outsourced to public settings.

At a macro level, a country’s parental leave regime is an important facilitating context for achieving an optimal infant quality of life. For instance, Galtry’s (2003) international comparison demonstrates a positive association between postbirth leave policies and duration of breastfeeding. She shows how the Swedish model encourages both high female employment participation rates over a mother’s working life and high breastfeeding rates through a parental leave and flexible working policy that enables many mothers to be more home-based for the first six months of a child’s life and extends men’s access to paid

parental leave beyond the first year of a child's life. The issue of breastfeeding highlights how specific national leave policies can invest in children's health while addressing gender equity and father involvement. As such economic investment in time for breastfeeding can be seen as a societal good, for instance, in support of World Health Organization (WHO) norms, which currently advise breastfeeding for the first six months for optimal health benefits to infants (WHO 2001).

## Conclusion

In most nations, infant care decisions have historically been left for mothers and fathers to resolve in private, but with expectations of parents' speedier return to work after childbirth, governments have been drawn into the dialogue. Conversations about who is going to care for the baby are clearly no longer solely a private family matter. In recent years, more governments have become explicit about parental leave entitlements for fathers as well as mothers for this early period in a child's life. The comparative analysis of fathers' patterns of leave-taking in twenty-four countries indicates that men's behavior is receptive to public policies developed to enhance their engagement with infants and children.

Innovative models of paternity leave and parental leave provisions are being introduced across industrialized nations, whether to promote the growth of dual-earning parents in Germany, to enhance fertility in Slovenia, or to extend gender equity in Iceland. Typically, policy instruments designed to promote paternal caring have been developed as an additional family support and have not involved taking leave away from mothers.

A new typology of father-care-sensitive leave models, introduced in this article, suggests that fathers' use of statutory leave is greatest when high income replacement (50 percent or more of earnings) is combined with extended duration (more than fourteen days). Father-targeted schemes heighten usage.

Impact studies of parental leave are in an early stage of development and only recently have started to examine the relevance of fathers and other relationships beyond the mother-child dyad during this period. However, the emerging evidence suggests that parental leave has the potential to boost fathers' emotional investment and connection with infants as well as their support of the mothers. Clearly, parents living in countries with strong statutory parental leave and early child care provision have greater "choice" in infant or child-sensitive care packages. These infants have the opportunity to start life in parental time-rich environments, often for the whole of the first year as in Nordic countries. By contrast, in countries whose governments are unable or unwilling to fund such systems of support, it is likely that only the more economically secure parents will be able to take significant time out of employment to provide care. Tensions associated with differential access to statutory leave raise the possibility of a new global polarization for infants: the risk of being born into either a parental-leave-rich or a parental-leave-poor household and indeed country. Future OECD reports on

children's outcomes in different welfare regimes will illuminate the extent of this risk (S. Chapple, Child Wellbeing Project, OECD, personal communication, 2008). However, concerns about the welfare of children cannot be developed in isolation from gender equity goals. Absence from the labor market carries substantial financial penalties and occupational risk, traditionally most borne by mothers. Developing societal policies to ensure a good quality of infant life therefore requires sensitive meshing with gender equity policy innovation. Managing the dilemmas between achieving child welfare and gender equity, particularly in economically fragile times, is a key global challenge ahead.

## Notes

1. At the time of press, the 2008 annual update had just been published (Moss and Korintus 2008).
2. In three cases, this option is in the context of a family-based parental leave entitlement (Finland, Germany, Quebec), in three an individual-based parental leave entitlement (Portugal, Slovenia, Spain), and in two a mixed individual and family parental leave entitlement (Iceland, Norway) (Moss 2007).
3. In four cases, this option is in the context of a family-based parental leave entitlement (Canada, Denmark, France, Hungary) and in three an individual-based parental leave entitlement (Belgium, Greece, Netherlands) (Moss 2007).
4. In four cases, this option is in the context of a family-based parental leave entitlement (Australia, Austria, Estonia, Poland) and in four an individual-based parental leave entitlement (Czech Republic, Ireland, Italy, United Kingdom) (Moss 2007).

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