

Sharing the caring
Swedish parents' attitudes to and use of parental leave
and continued family dynamics

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Abstract

Although the majority of Swedish women and men believe that couples should share parental leave equally, women still use the lion's share of the total parental leave. This mismatch between ideals and behavior has important consequences. Specifically, many individuals, in retrospect, report dissatisfaction with their division of parental leave. In this study we examine how attitudes to how parents ideally should share parental leave, actual division of parental leave, and discrepancies between the two are associated with (a) union dissolution risks, and (b) continued childbearing. We use Swedish panel data from the Young Adult Panel Study from 2009 and link register data on union dissolution and continued childbearing up until December 2012. Descriptive results indicate that both women and men experience considerable discrepancies between their attitudes to parental leave and the actual division of it. However, preliminary results indicate no evidence that this mismatch has consequences on union dissolution and continued child bearing. Rather, it is the actual sharing of parental leave that seem to matter, with higher levels of continued childbearing among couples where the man stayed home for 20-40 percent of the time, compared to couples where the man stayed home for shorter.

Introduction

During the last few decades, most of the western countries have seen an increase in female labor force participation rates. In Sweden and the rest of the Nordic countries, this trend has been followed by that men also to an increasing extent have assumed responsibilities for child rearing (Bernhardt et. al, 2008; Goldscheider, 2012). Among other things, this is reflected in that most women and men think it is important to share the leave and childcare as well as household tasks (Duvander 2014, Brandén, 2014).

Despite these generally positive attitudes towards men's involvement in the care of children, and despite the fact that there is a continued increase in it, men's involvement in the caring of small children is still lower than attitudes would predict. One example stems from the Swedish parental leave system, which allows women and men to share the 480 days of paid parental leave equally but where women still use 75 percent of the total parental leave (Swedish Social Insurance Agency, 2013) There hence exist a discrepancy between how women and men ideally believe parents should share the care of small children, and their actual behavior.

The discrepancy between ideals and behavior has the consequence that many women and men in retrospect report dissatisfaction with how long they were at home with their newborn child (Josefsson, 2007). If it is hard to live up to ideals on gender equal sharing, this is likely to have consequences for future behavior, not least continued childbearing and stability of unions. Research shows that couples where the man has been on parental leave have a faster pace to a second and third birth (Duvander and Andersson, 2006) and have lower risk for union dissolution (Oláh, 2001) than couples where the man did not stay at home. However, these studies focus on behavior and do not consider how well this behavior corresponds with women and men's ideals. In this study we add to this research by also examining the importance of *discrepancies* between beliefs on how couples ideally should share parental leave, and their actual sharing. We study how ideals, behavior and discrepancies between ideals and behavior are associated with (a) union dissolution risks, and (b) continued childbearing. Building on earlier research on expectations and outcomes, we hypothesize that couples in which the man or the women experience a discrepancy between ideals and behavior will experience higher union dissolution risks and lower levels of continued childbearing. Our research question is whether such discrepancies are more important

than the actual behavior. The results will also contribute to the understanding of how selection by expectations of shared childcare may explain the association between shared childcare and demographic outcomes.

We use Swedish panel data from the Young Adult Panel Study. In 2009 we collect all individuals who have at least one child with completed parental leave, and where this child was born in 2003 at the earliest, $n=556$. We link data on attitudes on parental leave as reported in 2003, hence measuring it before the parental leave of the youngest child. We then link survey and register data on union dissolution and continued childbearing from the birth of this child up until December 2012, and use multinomial logistic regressions to examine how attitudes to and sharing of parental leave are associated with union dissolution and continued childbearing.

Background

Studies suggest a link between the man's use of parental leave and continued childbearing, where couples in which the man use a moderate amount of parental leave proceed quicker to second and third births than couples where the man do not use any parental leave (Duvander and Andersson, 2006). Results for Norway strengthen the association (Duvander, Lappegard and Andersson, 2010). Attempts to explain this link between men's child-care involvement and continued childbearing have emphasized the importance of that men's involvement in the home reduces women's work load in the home. This may facilitate for women to combine work and family, which in turn could increase the willingness to have more children (Oláh, 2003; Duvander and Andersson, 2006). It may also be that men's involvement in and exposure to children increases their child orientation and desire for more children.

Further, another Swedish study with data from the 1980s and early 1990s found that divorce risks are lower among couples where the man used any parental leave compared to couples where the man did not stay at home with the child (Oláh, 2001). Explanations are likely to be the similar to the ones concerning continued childbearing, that is, that a shared workload makes it easier to continue also the union. Fathers' parental leave may also signal involvement in union specific capital, which can be interpreted as an intention to stay in the specific union.

Also, as Swedish women are engaged in paid work more or less to the same extent as men, men's non-involvement in the family may be perceived both as unfair and problematic in terms of constraints on time and energy. It goes against expectations that both spheres should be shared. In line with this it has been suggested that having an involved partner would increase women's life satisfaction, which may decrease break-up risks and therefore make it more likely to have more children with the same partner (Oláh, 2001).

It has also been suggested that the link between men's time on parental leave and couples' continued child bearing in part is a selection effect, meaning that the men who stay home with their children are the most family oriented men, who would have had more children even if they had not stayed home for long (Duvander and Andersson, 2006). It may also be that the men who invest in father's leave are men in stable unions that would not have dissolved even if the men did not have this opportunity.

Earlier studies on the link between parental leave uptake and demographic behavior have mainly focused on how long the man stayed home with their child, but not on whether the division was in line with what the parents believe is fair or a good solution. In this study, we add to the existing literature by examining the division of parental leave with a focus on potential discrepancies between ideals and behavior. This is a crucial dimension, because even though more than half of all women and men think they should share parental leave equally with their partner (own calculations using the Young Adult Panel Study), the absolute majority fails in doing so in Sweden (Swedish Social Insurance Agency, 2013). In line with this, it is common that men who stayed home very short, and women who stayed home very long, in retrospect are dissatisfied the division of the leave (Josefsson, 2007). The discrepancy is also likely to also create tension between the partners who discover that the gender equality they seek is not corresponding to their real life experience, which, in turn, is likely to have implications both on whether the partners will remain together, and on their continued childbearing. It may thus not only be the actual experience that matter for how an individual evaluates a situation. Rather, it is how well this experience matches with the expectations and ideals an individual had beforehand that structures how an individual evaluates a specified outcome. If an individual experiences a discrepancy between expectations and his or her experience when it comes to situations related to family life, this may have negative effects on relationship satisfaction (Kalmuss et al.,

1992). These ideas have been phrased into the Violated Expectations Framework (Kalmuss et al. 1992) and the Distributive Justice Framework (Thompson 1991), both emphasizing different dimensions of experiences, justice and satisfaction with a situation.

Findings indeed suggest a clear link between discrepancies between family related expectations and experiences, and individuals' relationship satisfaction, adaptation to the parental role, and continued child bearing. Kalmuss and colleagues (1992) interviewed American pregnant women during their last trimester of pregnancy, with a follow-up survey when the child was one year old. When pregnant, women generally had higher expectations on the fathers' involvement in child-care than what they actually experienced during the child's first year. This discrepancy had consequences on how well the mother adapted to parenthood, with a harder adaptation for women with discrepancies between expectations and experiences (Kalmuss et. a, 1992). This is in line with the results in a study by Belsky (1985), whose findings suggested that both women and men had higher expectations on the man's involvement in child-care than what became the case after the child was born. Parents whose postnatal experiences turned out less positive or more negative than they expected, experienced a more negative change in marriage after childbirth. The pattern was particularly pronounced for women (Belsky 1985). Ruble and colleagues (1988) found that very few pregnant women expected that they would do more than their partner after the child was born. Postnatal experiences however very rarely correspond with these expectations, where 40 percent of all women did more housework than their partner. Women who do more housework or child care than they expected to a larger extent report negative experiences on the man's child care involvement, and more often report that the child has had negative consequences on the relationship. However it has no effect on how close the woman feel to her partner (Ruble et. al, 1988). A recent study by Goldscheider and colleagues (2013) examine how this kind of discrepancy structures continued childbearing among Swedish young adults. Results indicate that individuals who believed that partners should share responsibilities for children, housework and paid work, but who did not share housework as egalitarian as attitudes would predict, experienced a slower transition to second births than individuals whose attitudes and behavior match, and particularly so for women (Goldscheider et al. 2013).

This study will examine the importance of discrepancies between how important an individual believe it is to share parental leave length equally and the actual division of

parental leave on union dissolution and continued childbearing The study adds to research field in particular by acknowledging that it is not only the length or the division of the leave, but how well this corresponds with ideals related to it, that matters. So two individuals who are on parental leave the same length may have fundamentally different experiences, based on how well this length corresponds with the ideals of the individual. This becomes important in a context where egalitarian values are widely embraced by most young individuals, but where various constraints are often yet to adapt to these shifting priorities.

Women who believe it is important to share parental leave equally but who still use the lion's share of the parental leave, are likely to feel trapped in a traditional female role they neither anticipated nor desired. In the same way, men who believe it is important to share parental leave equally, but who for some reason face obstacles to actual stay home with their child, experience a gender role they did not wish for either. These kinds of discrepancies are likely to have consequences. Hence, we predict that if an individual in retrospect is dissatisfied with the division of parental leave, or experience a discrepancy between his or her ideals and the actual sharing, it will lead to higher levels of union dissolution and and/or lower transition rates to continued child bearing. Furthermore, by studying discrepancy between ideals and behavior we come closer to addressing the question of selection of parents into specific behavior, and can better discern the actual effect of parental leave behavior on continued childbearing and union dissolution. For example, if the association between fathers' parental leave and continued childbearing is based on the selection of parents with such beliefs, we would find the positive association only among the parents who believe parents should share parental leave, but not the others.

The Swedish Parental Leave System

Ever since its introduction in 1974, the Swedish earnings-related parental insurance benefit is gender neutral, and parents have been entitled to share the leave as they prefer. The length of the parental leave has gradually been expanded over the years. In the 1980s it increased from six months to a year (plus an additional three months at a low flat rate), and in and in 2002 it again increased to 16 months (of which 13 months are paid at 80 percent of previous gross earnings). From 1995, one month of earnings-related leave was reserved for each parent, which means that one parent – generally the

mother – could no longer use up the whole leave. In 2002, the months reserved for respective parents were extended to two months (Duvander and Ferrarini, 2013). Similarly to the reserved months, other reforms, such as the gender equality bonus, increased ceiling of benefits and the parents' possibility to use leave at the same time, have aimed at a more gender equal sharing of the leave. The leave can be used in different ways, be combined with unpaid leave and used until the child is 8 years old, but often parents use a longer period of leave before the child starts preschool, and use the remaining days to extend holidays, reduce work hours or bridge temporary days when preschool is closed.

Fathers' share of the leave has increased steadily and today fathers use around a quarter of all leave (Swedish Social Insurance Agency, 2013). The most dramatic shift happened with the first reserved month after which around 8 out of 10 fathers use any leave during the child's first two years. Before the introduction of reserved time about 4 out of 10 did the same (Duvander and Johansson, 2012). There are large and increasing variations in how much leave the father uses where well paid, highly educated men in the public sector are the ones who use most leave (Duvander and Johansson, forthcoming). Fathers with a low income or weak attachment to the labor market are the ones that fall behind and the gap seems to increase. By age 2 most children in Sweden has started daycare and the parents are back at work. A recent study estimated mothers' average leave length to 13,5 months and fathers' to 3,5 months (Duvander and Viklund 2014). Couples sharing the leave more or less equally between them are still few, but increasing. Today almost 13 percent of all parents share the leave benefit days somewhere between 40-60 percent of the days (Swedish Social Insurance Agency, 2013:8). When parents are asked about their division the major reasons to that they shared as they did are economic constraints, the father's job situation and the mother's wish to be home longer (Swedish Social Insurance Agency 2013:9).

Data and analytical strategy

For our analyses we use the Swedish Young Adult Panel Study (YAPS, www.suda.su.se/yaps). YAPS is a three wave panel data set with surveys in 1999, 2003 and 2009. It contains a stratified random sample of Swedish born individuals from cohorts 1968, 1972, 1976, and 1980, with (a) two Swedish born parents, (b) at least

one Turkish parent, or (c) at least one Polish parent. In total, the data set contains 3547 respondents. The analyses in this study build on the final survey wave, in 2009. At this point in time, 934 respondents had at least one child where the parental leave had ended. To be able to measure attitudes to parental leave prior to the actual leave, we link data from the 2003 wave to the 2009 wave, and only include respondents whose youngest child with finished parental leave was born 2003 and onwards, n=556. This was necessary as many respondents changed their attitudes to parental leave after having finished the parental leave (see discussion below). We follow the respondents from the birth of this child to the birth of the next child, union dissolution, or December 2012, whatever comes first.

Births are measured by linked register data measuring births up until December 2012. Union dissolution is measured by partner biographies provided by the respondents up until spring 2009. For the period 2009–2012, we link register data to the survey, and measure union dissolution by whether the respondent has divorced or if the two partners no longer live in the same property. We will perform multinomial logistic regressions on how mismatch between attitudes towards parental leave sharing and the actual sharing of parental leave is associated with continued childbearing and union dissolution, whatever comes first.

Our main independent variables are (1) attitudes to the sharing of parental leave, and (2) actual sharing of parental leave. Attitudes to the sharing of parental leave are measured by the question *“How much do you agree with the following statement: Parents should share parental leave about equally”*, asked in 2003. The scale is from 1 (Do not agree at all) to 5 (Agree completely). We distinguish between “Do not agree” (1–3, including around 50 percent of the respondents) and “Agree” (4–5). Parental leave length is measured by how many weeks or months the respondent reports they and their partner stayed home with the child. We are interested in the sharing of parental leave, measured by the man’s percentage of the total leave uptake, and distinguish between 0–19 percent, 20–39 percent, and 40 percent or more.

In the multinomial logistic regressions, we will also control for (as of the year of birth of the last child) birth cohort of respondent (1968, 1972, 1976 and 1980), number of common children, including the child with the latest completed parental leave (1, 2 and 3 or more), and the birth year of the youngest child with completed parental leave.

Descriptive results

Table 1 includes descriptive statistics of the outcomes. Note that the variable captures the first transition that happens, so respondents that had another child with their partner may experience union dissolution later without it being captured in this variable. Half of all women and men remain in same union and with as many children in December 2012. Around 40 percent have another child with the same partner, and around 10 percent experience union dissolution without any more children being born.

Table 1

First transition after the birth of the youngest child with completed parental leave

	Men %	Women %
No more children and still in same union in December 2012	50	53
Had another child with partner	39	37
Union dissolution	11	10
Total	100	100
n	207	349

Table 2 includes the distribution of our independent variables. As is commonly found, women are more likely to participate in the survey than men. About half of the respondents are positive to that parents should share parental leave equal. However, only 14 percent of the respondents report that the man used at least 40 percent of the latest completed parental leave length. And for as many as half of the respondents, the man uses less than 20 percent of it. There hence exist clear discrepancies between attitudes and behavior. The majority of the sample is born in the 1970's. For 39 percent of the sample, the child with the latest completed parental leave is the first common child, whereas for 44 percent it is the second common child. Finally, about half of all children were born in 2006 or 2007, with an additional 20 percent born in 2005.

Table 2**Distribution of independent and control variables**

	n	%
Sex		
Man	207	37
Woman	349	63
Attitudes to the sharing of parental leave in 2003		
Parents should not share/neutral	273	49
Parents should share	283	51
The man's share of the total parental leave		
<20%	275	49
20-40%	151	27
40% or more	77	14
Missing	53	10
Year of birth of respondent		
1968	95	17
1972	188	34
1976	201	36
1980	72	13
Number of common children		
1	219	39
2	245	44
3 or more	92	17
Year of birth of child with latest completed parental leave as of 2009		
2003	61	11
2004	86	15
2005	112	20
2006	139	25
2007	141	25
2008	16	3
2009	1	0
n	556	100

Table 3

Attitudes on whether parents should share parental leave equally, by actual sharing. Column percentages.

		Parental leave attitudes			
		Men		Women	
		Parents should not share/neutral %	Parents should share equally %	Parents should not share/neutral %	Parents should share equally %
The father's share of the total parental leave	<20%	61	34	64	39
	20–40%	26	29	22	32
	40% or more	8	28	3	20
	Missing	5	10	12	10
Total		100	100	100	100
n		103	104	170	179

Table 3 includes attitudes to the sharing of parental leave, as reported in 2003, by actual sharing as reported in 2009. The darker the shade of the cell, the higher is the mismatch between attitudes and behavior. The table reveals striking patterns of discrepancies between how people believe parents should share parental leave, and their actual sharing. This is especially the case for individuals who believe it is important to share parental leave equally, who rarely live the egalitarian lives they perceive as ideal. Only 28 percent of the men who believe parents should share parental leave equally use at least 40 percent of the total parental leave. And among women, only 20 percent have a partner that uses at least 40 percent of the total leave. And for as many as 34 percent of these men and 39 percent of these women, the father uses less than 20 percent of the total leave.

Among women and men who do not believe parents should share parental leave equally, consistency between attitudes and behavior is higher. 61 percent of the men and 64 percent of the woman have a very unequal sharing, reporting that the woman used at least 80 percent of the total parental leave. Only 8 percent of the men and 3 percent of the women report that the man used more than 40 percent of the total leave if they did not believe parents should share the parental leave equally..

Our main research question concerns whether discrepancies between attitudes to sharing of parental leave in 2003 and actual sharing as reported in 2009 is associated

with lower continued childbearing and higher risks of union dissolution. Table 4 and Figure 1 give some initial clues on this association.

Table 4

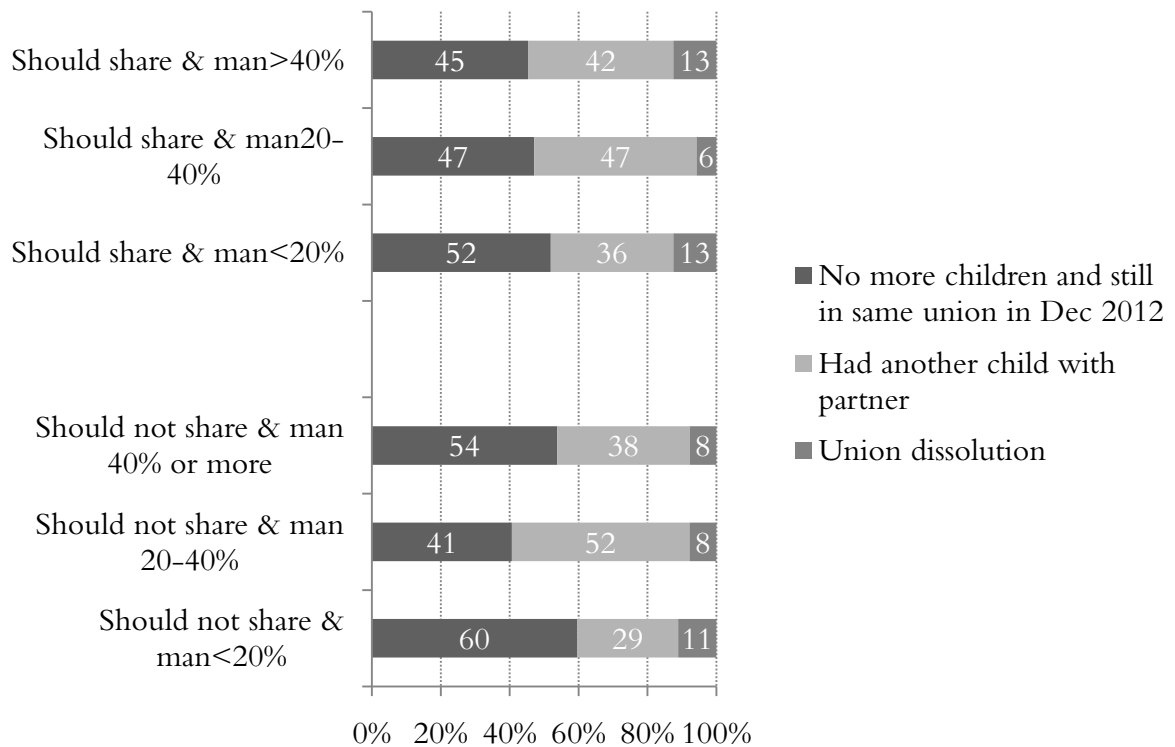
Continued childbearing and union dissolution by attitudes on whether parents should share parental leave equally and actual sharing. Row percentages.

	No more children and still in same union in Dec 2012	Had another child with partner	Union dissolution	Total
Attitudes to the sharing of parental leave, %				
Parents should not share /neutral	55	36	10	100
Parents should share	49	40	11	100
The man's share of the total parental leave, %				
<20%	57	32	12	100
20-39%	44	49	7	100
40% or more	47	42	12	100
Missing	55	34	11	100

Table 4 indicates that respondents who in 2003 believed that parents should share parental leave was slightly more common to have another child than individuals who did not believe parents should share parental leave, 40 percent versus 36 percent. There is no difference in union dissolution rates by attitude to the sharing of parental leave. The difference in continued childbearing and union dissolution by actual sharing appears to be larger. Only 32 percent of the respondents who report that the man only used 20 percent or less of the total parental leave, had another child until December 2012, as compared to 52 percent of the respondents where the man used 20-39 percent of the leave. Among these couples, only 7 percent experience union dissolution before having another child, as compared to 11-12 percent of couples where the man either used more or less parental leave.

Figure 1

Continued childbearing and union dissolution by discrepancy between attitudes on whether parents should share parental leave equally and actual sharing.



In Figure 1, we present descriptive statistics on how discrepancy between attitudes and behavior is associated with childbearing and union dissolution. Contrary to our expectations, we find no clear patterns indicating that it is the discrepancy between attitudes and behavior that matters for shaping continued childbearing and union dissolution. If this was the case, we would expect the highest levels of union dissolution, and the lowest levels of continued childbearing, among respondents who (1) believed parents should share parental leave, but the man stayed home for less than 20 percent of the time, or (2) believed parents should not share parental leave, but the man stayed home for more than 40 percent of the time. We find no indications that this is the case. Respondents in couples where the man used 20–40 percent of the leave are more likely to have another child, regardless of whether they believe parents should share parental leave equally or not.

The next steps of our analysis include multinomial logistic regressions where we control for birth cohort of respondent, the number of common children, and the birth year of the youngest child with completed parental leave.

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