

Article

Similar Negotiations over Childcare? A Comparative Study of Fathers' Parental Leave Use in Finland and Sweden

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Abstract: Fathers' leave use is promoted in many countries, but so far with different success. Major explanations of different usage revolve around economic bargaining between parents and economic constraints in the household. By using extensive register data from 1999–2009 in Finland and Sweden, this study asks whether fathers' use of parental leave in the two countries is determined by the same socioeconomic characteristics on the individual and the household level once we control for sociodemographic factors. Striking similarities in what influences fathers' use of leave in the two contexts are found, even though leave is used at very different levels and the policy design differs remarkably. Generally, fathers with a similar income level to the mother use leave the most, but in high-income households the mother's higher income leads to the highest propensity of fathers' leave take-up. The results indicate that equal bargaining positions are associated with fathers' leave use but also that mothers' stronger position often facilitates fathers' leave. We conclude that the role of gendered bargaining positions should be studied in interaction with the level of resources in the household.

Keywords: parental leave; Finland; Sweden; fathers; childcare; family policy; gender equality



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1. Introduction

Fathers' participation in childcare is today promoted through parental leave policies in many countries [1,2] and it is in most of them motivated by various aspects of gender equality. The desired gender equal effects of fathers' parental leave are not just a division of childcare, but also spill-over effects on other household tasks and a more gender equal labor market where expectations on mothers and fathers are more similar. It is often hard to prove such outcomes as causal because selection into parental leave use [3,4] but it is without doubt that different aspects of gender equality are associated, such as, for example, fathers' parental leave use and the gendered division of childcare during the preschool years [5–9]. Parental leave use has also been related to the income development of both mothers and fathers [10–12]. Such associations prompt the question of how fathers' leave use can be facilitated, and whether the determinants of leave use can be generalized between contexts. Most studies on fathers' parental leave use are studies on one country [13–16], while this study compares two contexts with both similarities and differences, that is, Finland and Sweden. The aim of this study is thus twofold: to analyze which determinants are important for whether the father uses parental leave, and whether such determinants may be generalized between contexts. Here, we are interested in the interaction of policy design and individual-level determinants of leave use.

The Nordic countries are often cited as forerunners regarding gender equality, not least because the parental leave policy not only allows but also encourages sharing [17]. However, within the Nordic countries, there are large variations both in policy set-up and the use of parental leave, and this study wants to draw attention to these differences.

Fathers' use of parental leave also varies substantially between countries [17], and the variation between Finland and Sweden is a key example. Even though there are many similarities between the countries and the differences in policy design have decreased, Finnish fathers are still much less likely to use leave than Swedish fathers. Here, we will focus on the situation in the two countries a decade ago, when differences in policy were still stark, so as to be able to conclude on differences. Ref. [18] showed that the large difference in fathers' use of parental leave between Finland and Sweden mainly stems from differences in policy design and other contextual factors and that individual norms play a smaller but still statistically significant role. As we are interested here in how policy affects the household negotiations over parental leave, we study the combination of partners' characteristics, an area that is so far understudied.

We compare determinants of fathers' parental leave use in Finland and Sweden by taking into account both the father's and the mother's characteristics and their combination to find out whether such determinants work in the same way in these two countries. Sweden has a longer tradition of parental leave being available to both parents and more actively promotes fathers' leave use. Reserved time for fathers, introduced in 1995, seems to be especially efficient in increasing fathers' leave [19]. Although Finland has a similarly generous parental leave system, the discourse about gender equality in family policy has not been as important as in Sweden [20] and the policies for fathers' parental leave use have been introduced much later than in Sweden. In Finland, the reservation of parental leave for the father was basically lacking until 2013. However, in 2022, Finland is planning to reform the parental leave system altogether towards the Swedish system. The proposal includes longer and equal quotas of which part is transfereable to the other parent. Additionally, the flexibility and replacement rate of fathers' parental leave are about to be partly increased [21]. Such development makes it highly relevant to investigate the outcomes from the earlier policy set-ups as this will hint at what can be expected from the proposed policy development.

Currently, fathers' leave in Finland and Sweden is divided into leave that (1) is reserved for one parent, and (2) can be shared between parents. Until 2013, Finland incorporated a third alternative, a so-called conditional quota, where the father has access to two bonus weeks of leave only if he uses the last two weeks of shared leave. Such different arrangements of leave policies create different negotiation settings between parents. Negotiations over leave are indicated here by relative income, as well as relative education, in the parental couple. Our main focus is whether fathers' parental leave use in different policy set-ups is related to the bargaining power of the mother's and father's characteristics in the couple. Is it couples with similar income levels who share leave in both countries? Is the bargaining for parental leave dependent on the economic restriction of the couple? We start with a short discussion of the factors known to influence fathers' leave and thereafter spell out the differences between the Finnish and Swedish parental leave systems. From there, we move on to our expectations, to describe our data and present our results, which will be discussed last.

2. When Do Fathers Use Parental Leave?

Patterns of parental leave use are largely framed by the possibilities that the legislation provides. It is pointed out that well-paid leave and the non-transferability of leave will be important for fathers to use leave [17,22,23]. Policies and reforms will in addition impact ideals, identities and practices [24]. Therefore, the cultural image of an appropriate choice is likely to be more or less coherent with policy or at least influenced by the policy set-up. However, norms and attitudes in a specific context are to be considered as both influencing and being influenced by the policy set-up [25].

Within the institutional frame, there are different perspectives on what can influence fathers' leave use. From an economic point of view, income optimization within the family is emphasized [26,27], while sociological perspectives put more weight on gender perceptions [6,28]. Furthermore, a perspective of bargaining or negotiation acknowledges

the two parents who may have different preferences of how and whether the leave should be shared [29,30].

According to economic theory, couples make decisions with the overarching goals of economic optimization. Parental leave use is then perceived as a rational choice where utility within the couple is maximized, indicating that the difference between the father's and mother's potential wages is a major determinant of fathers' leave use. If the father's wage is higher than the mother's wage, it makes economic sense for the mother to use the leave, as this would minimize income loss now and in the future. The opposite is also true. Additionally, household income level per se may affect parental leave use as the level of household income will determine how much one can deviate from economically efficient choices, particularly when childcare is expensive [31]. Low-income couples may not be able to afford income loss, which prevents fathers from using parental leave. However, in the case of reserved time or a quota for fathers, leave may be used because it would otherwise be forfeited, especially if the economic loss is minimized by a high replacement rate (see [27] for a discussion and econometric implementation of the quota).

It is found that parents' labor market statuses, education and income levels, as well as the father's share of income, are important for parental leave use [13,23,32,33]. The relationship between leave and fathers' income seems to be curvilinear, as the fathers with the highest incomes do not use the most leave. One likely explanation is that fathers with the highest incomes consider the loss of income too high or judge their work situation to not allow for parental leave. Fathers' parental leave may also be affected by other work-related factors, such as gender composition in the workplace, size and sectors [34] (Bygren and Duvander 2006) as well as workplace attitudes [35], but also the availability of substitutes to take on work while the parent is on leave [36].

Furthermore, the role of the father and fathering practices are dependent on gender attitudes among parents. Parental leave division may be seen as manifesting gender roles or "doing gender" [37]. Expectations of what a mother and father should do are often powerful but can change over time. For instance, in recent decades in Sweden a period of parental leave is clearly expected of fathers [38]. Additionally, power relations in the couple are gendered, where, for example, maternal gatekeeping and paternal resistance may be at work. Preferences regarding parental leave use are in addition likely to be contextual and related to the available parental leave system [39]. For instance, Finnish fathers claim to be restricted by gender roles in taking leave, while in contrast, in Sweden, parents cite economic and work reasons as major determinants of their leave division [40,41]. However, more recent studies imply that both gender roles and economic aspects are important in both countries [36,42], and the actual change over time in how fathers motivate their (non-)leave use still needs to be studied.

According to bargaining theory, the division of parental leave is negotiated between parents based on economic resources, but also by career prospects and other capital that can be used on the labor market, such as education [29]. Equal resources would here lead to equal sharing of both preferred and non-preferred tasks, but such predictions have to be complemented with gendered ideas about childcare and perceptions of the appropriateness of various work-childcare divisions [8,43]. More recent theories also connect bargaining power with gendered institutions [30] where parental leave policy is a good example.

One of the main challenges when studying parental leave use is that parents' preferences for taking leave vary and are hard to observe, similarly to preferences for childcare [44]. Some fathers may have strong preferences for using leave and some not. The same is obviously true for mothers, but because practically all mothers in the Nordic countries take some parental leave, their preferences are mainly going to influence whether they want to share leave with the father. Preferences are obviously related to attitudes and it is the case that fathers' increase in childcare (and parental leave) has been strongest among highly educated parents [15,45]. Preferences for leave use are likely to change over time and depending on context, for example, depending on whether fathers' leave is encouraged and accepted at the institutional level. It is therefore plausible that preferences for leave

use among fathers correlate with policy context; that is, policy differences between Finland and Sweden may also reflect variations in preferences [25,41,46].

3. Two Gender-Equal Systems?

Finnish and Swedish parental leave systems can both be portrayed as belonging to the Nordic model [47]. As depicted in Figure 1, legislation change over time and the lengths of leaves differ greatly between the countries. Parental leave in total is approximately five months longer in Sweden than in Finland.

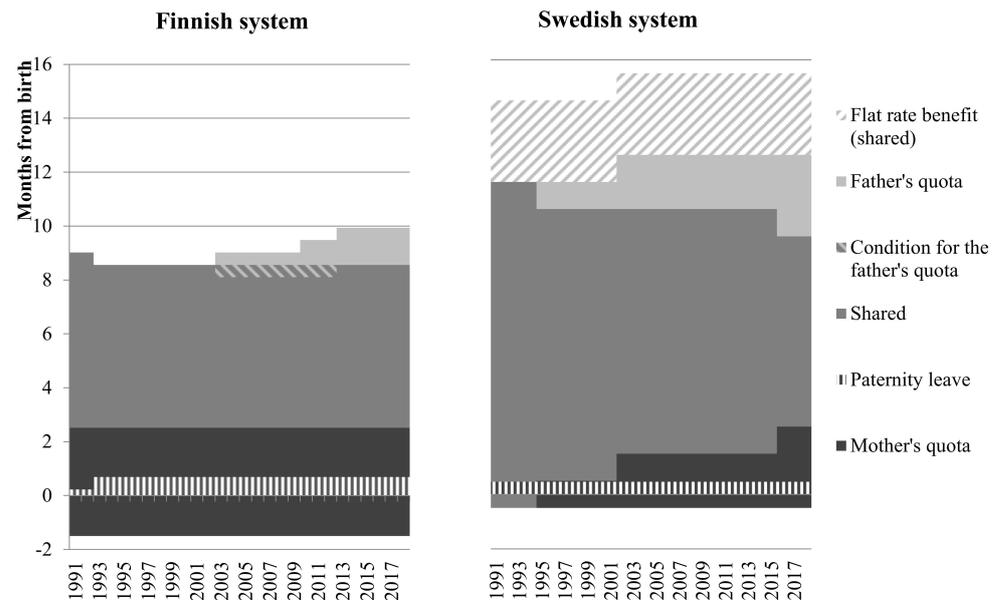


Figure 1. The development of parental leave quota legislation in Sweden and Finland 1991–2018.

In both countries, fathers have access to paternity leave, often called “daddy days”, which is typically used immediately after birth while the mother is also at home. This is left out of this study as this does not imply fathers’ individual participation in childcare. The parental leave is to the largest part intended for parents to share as they wish, but in Sweden there are equal reserved parts for the mother and father: a first month in 1995, a second in 2002 and a third in 2016. In Finland, a period of four months is reserved for the mother, and six months can be shared between the parents. The leave reserved for fathers was introduced in 2003, giving them access to two “bonus weeks” only if they used the last two weeks of the shared parental leave (gray-lined block in graph 1). This condition was abolished in 2013, which can be interpreted as the introduction of a real quota in Finland. However, our analysis concentrates on the period when the conditional quota was in force and a few years before (1999–2009).

Fathers’ use of parental leave in Finland is greatly affected by the popular use of home care allowance after parental leave [40]. If the mother intends to use the home care allowance, she may find it difficult to return to work for a short period during the father’s leave. This was the primary reason why in 2007 (and further in 2013) fathers were granted the option to postpone the use of their quota. Almost 90 percent of families (mostly mothers) in Finland use the home care allowance to extend the duration of child care at home before the start of public childcare [48]. Sweden also implemented a home care allowance during 2008–2015, but the take-up rates remained very low (2% in 2013, see [49]). Consequently, the enrollment rates for public childcare are much higher for all ages in Sweden than in Finland, although both countries provide universal access to high quality public childcare at a subsidized cost [50].

In Sweden, parental leave is considered an individual right of each parent with custody regardless of living arrangements or gender. In Finland, until 2017, fathers’ entitlement

was tied to marriage or cohabitation with the mother. Cohabiting partners without legal custody are entitled to use the paternal benefits in Finland but not in Sweden.

The Swedish system allows the transfer of parental leave days from one parent to the other, by agreement and signature. As mothers use on average 75 percent of all days, days are frequently signed over. The reserved period, however, cannot be signed over. In Finland, one parent is free to use all the shared leave, and the other parent's consent is not necessary.

The replacement rates in the two countries are similar. In Sweden, until 1995, parents received 90 percent of their earlier earnings up to a ceiling. In the 1990s, the replacement rate was reduced to 80 percent, and the ceiling lagged behind, resulting in many fathers actually receiving a lower replacement. In the mid-2000s, the replacement was reduced to 77.6 percent, but the ceiling was elevated. In Finland, the replacement rate is 60–70 percent of earlier income, depending on year and income. However, employers in both countries often supplement the rate to full replacement (or often 90% in Sweden). Parents with no earnings before using the leave receive a flat rate, which has been increased since the start of the 2000s both in Sweden and Finland.

4. Expectations

In both Finland and Sweden, it is expected that families with high income and education are likely to share leave more, as they often have flexible work situations, more autonomy and more gender-equal attitudes [42]. They can afford to share the leave. Parents with a lower level of resources will not have the same flexibility to share the leave. An equal level of economic resources or human capital between the parents will likely lead to sharing, as gender equality in one area will be associated with gender equality in another area and both partners' negotiation power will be as strong.

We expect that the parent with highest resources is likely to have more of a say of whether to share the leave or not, and the question remains of whether this parent wants to share the leave. We expect that mothers' higher level of resources both regarding income and education will lead to fathers using leave more often, as this may lead to further sharing of childcare and household work. However, regarding fathers with higher resources, it is less clear that they will use their power to take leave. If we can assume that high income and education indicate work orientation for both mothers and fathers, it would lead to opposite predictions by gender for fathers' leave.

We investigate these patterns in Sweden, where there is an acceptance and even expectation that fathers will use the leave, and in Finland, where there is less policy encouragement for fathers to use the leave. For Sweden, we examine fathers' use of any leave, but also leave above the reserved time, the shared leave, which is more clearly negotiable. In Finland, we analyze fathers' use of leave which includes the conditional quota, also negotiable between parents. The association between relative resources in the couple and fathers' parental leave is expected to be strongest in policy settings where negotiations are most likely to take place, that is, especially for shared leave in Sweden, and secondly for the conditional quota in Finland. We expect relative resources to matter least for the use of the father's quota in Sweden, which will be forfeited if not used by the father.

The household's economic resources provide the framework for how parental leave may be used. Therefore, we examine fathers' parental leave use by different levels of household income. It is expected that fathers use leave more often when household income allows for it, but also that negotiations over leave (relative resources in the couples) will matter more when household income allows for flexibility.

5. Materials and Methods

For both countries, we use detailed longitudinal register microdata for first births between 1999 and 2009. For Finland, a 60 percent random sample is used [51], and for Sweden, we use the entire population. These data include sociodemographic variables

where parents and children are linked, as well as information on educational level, income, labor market attachment and social insurance benefits, including parental benefit days for both parents. The data suit our scope but have three important limitations. First, in Sweden, the information on parental benefits is annual. To equalize the follow-up of children born in different months, we restrict our analysis to children born in December and follow their parents' use of leave for two years. Earlier studies [52] have shown that there is some selection with regard to which men and women have children at the end of the year in Sweden, where foreign-born individuals and individuals with lower education are overrepresented. In the models, we control for the immigration status of the father and the educational level of both parents. Second, in Sweden, the information on parental benefit days is related to the parent and not to the child, which may create some bias in multi-child families. Consequently, we focus on first parity to avoid confusing the leaves taken for different children. We also control for the couple having more children during the time of follow-up. Third, the eligibility of divorced fathers and cohabiting partners differs between the countries. Hence, we restrict the analysis to couples who live together during the two years after the child's birth. Parents of twins and adopted children are excluded because the parental leave rules differ, and cases where children or parents die or migrate are excluded. Our outcome variable of interest is fathers' leave use during the child's first two years.

We use linear probability models to estimate the propensity of fathers' parental leave use. We include two models for Sweden, one with the binary outcome of fathers using any leave at all and one with the binary outcome of using more than the quota for fathers. As the quota increased to two months in 2002, we define the outcome as using more than the quota, which is up to 30 days for children born until 2001 and thereafter 60 days. For Finland, one model with the binary outcome of fathers' leave is included.

Income is measured the year before the child was born to prevent it from being affected by the use of parental leave. Household income is categorized into terciles. We also relate the father's and mother's income in a variable measuring (1) male breadwinners, where the father earns more than 75% of the household income, (2) "1.5 earners", where the fathers earn between 75% and 55% of the household income, (3) dual earners, where the father and mother earn between 45% and 55% each, and (4) female breadwinners, where the father earns less than 45% of the household income. Education is grouped into (1) both tertiary, (2) father tertiary, mother lower, (3) mother tertiary and father lower, and (4) both lower than tertiary. We control for the age of the father (<25; 25–29; 30–34; 35–39; 40+) as well as for the age difference between the parents. We consider parents who are a maximum of three years apart as being the same age. We also control for the year of birth of the child for whom parental leave is used, whether another child is born within two years and the immigrant status of the father (native-born; immigrants who arrived fewer than 5 years before the child was born, and 6 or more years before the child was born). To evaluate whether the level of resources (economic and human capital) is important, we introduce two interactive terms in our final model: the interaction between relative income and income terciles and the interaction between relative education and income terciles.

6. Results

Descriptive statistics in Table 1 show that the fathers' take-up of parental leave is much more common in Sweden than in Finland when the whole period 1999 to 2009 is measured (81% vs. 13%), even if we only consider using more than the reserved time (44%). The Finnish take-up rates fall below the Swedish rates in all subcategories of age, education and relative income distribution. However, the patterns of take-up within a factor are similar. In Finland, the take-up rate increases rapidly over time, while in Sweden, the increase in taking more than the quota is slower but starts from a much higher level in 1999.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of fathers using parental leave in Finland and Sweden during child's first two years, percentage in the sample and take-up rate.

	Finland			Sweden				
	Freq	%	Take-Up Rate, %	Freq	%	Quota	Take-Up Rate, %	
							Quota	Shared Leave
Total	10,504	100	13	24,304	100	44		81
Year of birth								
1999	976	9	3	1823	8	41		77
2000	866	8	2	1854	8	43		79
2001	858	8	2	1899	8	45		77
2002	923	9	7	2031	8	36		81
2003	1020	10	11	2154	9	40		82
2004	940	9	10	2236	9	44		82
2005	994	10	13	2503	10	43		82
2006	957	9	14	2380	10	46		82
2007	1010	10	21	2530	10	45		81
2008	929	9	24	2363	10	47		81
2009	1031	10	28	2531	10	48		82
Father's age group								
<25	2236	21	5	3019	12	33		76
25–29	3565	34	14	8051	33	44		83
30–34	2779	27	18	7878	32	49		83
35–39	1110	11	15	3495	14	45		79
40+	814	8	10	1861	8	35		73
Age difference								
Mother older	440	4	13	1214	5	46		82
The same	6578	63	14	14,315	59	47		83
Father older	3486	33	11	8775	36	39		77
Household income tercile								
I	3501	33	5	8100	33	32		68
II	3501	33	10	8101	33	44		86
III	3502	33	24	8103	33	55		88
Immigrant Status								
Native	9846	94	13	19,752	81	48		85
less than 5 years	262	3	6	1939	8	39		54
6 or more years	396	4	7	2600	11	23		65
missing	0	0		13	0	30		69
Education								
Both tertiary	2593	25	23	7515	31	61		86
Only mother tertiary	2295	22	15	4636	19	46		83
Only father tertiary	924	9	12	2406	10	38		75
Both low	4692	45	6	9671	40	31		77
Siblings born within 2 years								
No	6077	58	13	19,156	79	44		81
yes after 1 year				100	0	42		73
yes after 2 year	4427	42	12	5048	21	45		81
Father's income share								
less than 45%	2242	21	9	3790	16	33		70
45–55%	2333	22	16	7186	30	44		88
55–74%	4220	40	14	9876	41	52		85
more than 75%	1709	16	9	3452	14	38		65

It is the households with income in the highest tercile that have the largest proportion of fathers' leave use both in Finland and in Sweden. In both countries, fathers most often use leave in households where the parents earn approximately equal incomes and when the fathers earn slightly more. Furthermore, in households where both have tertiary education, take-up is higher, but households where only the mother has tertiary education have higher take-up rates compared to households where only the father has tertiary education. The multivariate analyses in Table 2 show that it is becoming increasingly common to use leave among fathers in Finland over time, something that is less obvious for Sweden.

The models indicate that fathers in high-income households use leave more often. Fathers in Finland use leave more often when they are in the top tercile of household income. In Sweden, fathers in households with the lowest income use parental leave the least. With regard to using shared leave in Sweden, household income has a clear positive association.

Similarly to the descriptive statistics, fathers in couples where both partners contribute equally to the household income use leave most often. This is found both for Finland and Sweden and the same pattern also applies to using shared leave in Sweden. As expected, the association in Sweden seems stronger for using shared leave than for using only the reserved time. Fathers also use leave less often in couples where the mother has a higher income, and that is not expected. It may, however, be explained by mothers manifesting gender roles by taking the main responsibility for childcare. These mothers have the best bargaining position and may actually prefer to take the whole leave and not go back to work. Likewise, it seems that in households where the father is the main earner, his advantage in bargaining power leads to less use of leave. The results here mainly support that gender equality in one area tends to be associated with gender equality in another area.

Regarding education, the expectation was that having an education at the same level or having a high level of education translates to more sharing of parental leave. In both Finland and Sweden, it is most common that fathers use leave in cases where both parents have high education, and fathers' use of leave is least common in cases where both have low education.

Regarding relative education, it seems not to matter whether the father or mother has higher education in Finland, while in Sweden, the mother's higher education leads to a higher propensity of fathers using any leave and using the shared leave. One interpretation is that mothers' higher education is more crucial for her returning to work earlier and the father is thus more encouraged to go on parental leave. It is possible that her negotiating power is stronger in the more generous Swedish system. Note, however, that mothers' higher income is not clearly associated with the same outcome.

In addition, we find that the youngest and oldest fathers in Finland seem less likely to use leave, while in Sweden, older fathers tend to use leave less, also when shared leave is considered. The age difference in the couple seems unimportant for fathers' leave use in any of the settings. Overall, we find quite similar patterns in Finland and Sweden, even if use is at very different levels. The coefficients tell us that variation between groups of parents is strongest for shared leave in Sweden, but for using any leave in both Finland and Sweden, the sizes of the coefficients are quite similar.

The next step is to investigate how the relative resources of partners play out at different levels of household income. In Figures 2–4, the interaction between the level of household income in terciles and the father's share of the income is shown for Finland and Sweden when other factors are controlled for. As the levels of use are different, we present the findings in three figures where the scales are different, but the scale intervals are the same.

Table 2. Linear probability of father using parental leave in Finland and Sweden during child’s first two years.

	Finland		Sweden			
	Binary Take-up, Shared Leave		Binary Take-up, Any Leave		Binary Take-up, More than the Quota	
	Coeff	Pr > ChiSq	Coeff	Pr > ChiSq	Coeff	Pr > ChiSq
Year of birth (ref. 1999)						
2000	−0.01	0.324	0.01	0.518	0.06	0.377
2001	−0.02	0.264	−0.02	0.153	0.08	0.234
2002	0.03	0.031	0.02	0.200	−0.35	0.000
2003	0.06	0.000	0.02	0.051	−0.22	0.002
2004	0.05	0.000	0.02	0.123	−0.10	0.134
2005	0.08	0.000	0.03	0.022	−0.06	0.347
2006	0.09	0.000	0.03	0.007	0.04	0.587
2007	0.16	0.000	0.02	0.054	0.00	0.995
2008	0.18	0.000	0.01	0.333	0.04	0.578
2009	0.22	0.000	0.03	0.012	0.06	0.343
Household income (2nd quintile)						
1	0.00	0.661	−0.09	0.000	−0.19	0.000
3	0.07	0.000	0.01	0.398	0.18	0.000
Father’s income share (45–55%)						
less than 45%	−0.03	0.000	−0.10	0.000	−0.26	0.000
55–74%	−0.01	0.163	−0.03	0.000	−0.34	0.000
more than 75%	−0.02	0.075	−0.10	0.000	−0.36	0.000
Parent’s education level (ref. Mother tertiary)						
both low	−0.06	0.000	−0.03	0.000	−0.51	0.000
Father tertiary	−0.01	0.243	−0.03	0.001	−0.19	0.000
Both high	0.05	0.000	0.03	0.000	0.57	0.000
Father’s age group (ref. [30–34])						
<25	−0.03	0.002	0.03	0.002	−0.08	0.109
25–29	−0.01	0.201	0.03	0.000	−0.01	0.687
35–39	−0.02	0.033	−0.02	0.002	−0.16	0.000
40+	−0.04	0.003	−0.06	0.000	−0.45	0.000
Age difference (ref. same)						
Mother older	0.00	0.913	0.00	0.790	0.05	0.464
Father older	−0.01	0.208	0.01	0.049	0.00	0.887
Years since migration (Ref. Native-born)						
less than 5 years	−0.04	0.027	−0.22	0.000	−0.90	0.000
6 or more years	−0.05	0.003	−0.12	0.000	−0.48	0.000
More children (ref. No children within 2 years)						
within 1 year	0.03	0.614	0.04	0.253	0.54	0.011
within 2 years	0.02	0.004	0.01	0.116	0.05	0.114
<i>Constant</i>	0.07	0.000	0.89	0.000	0.22	0.001

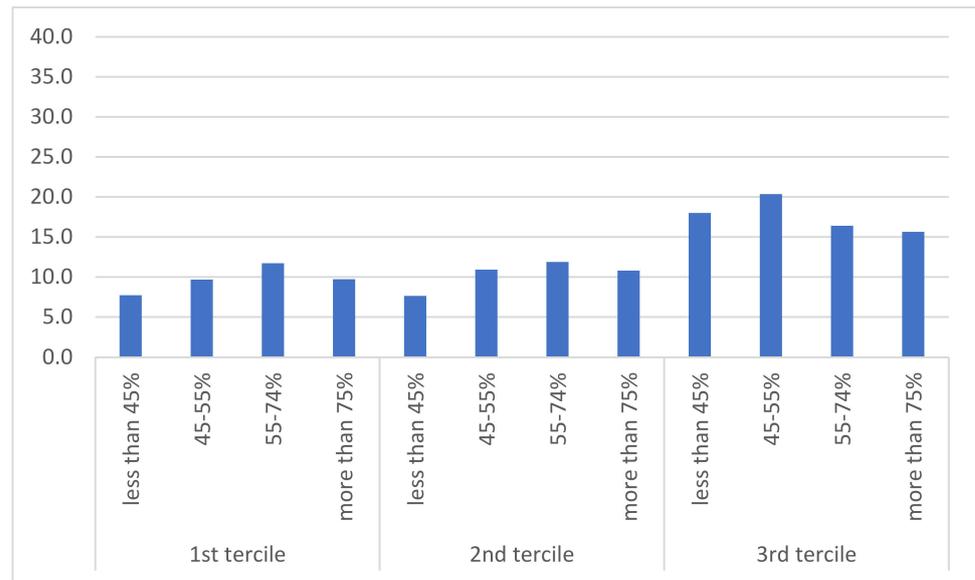


Figure 2. Interaction between father’s relative income and income tertiles for fathers’ parental leave use in Finland.

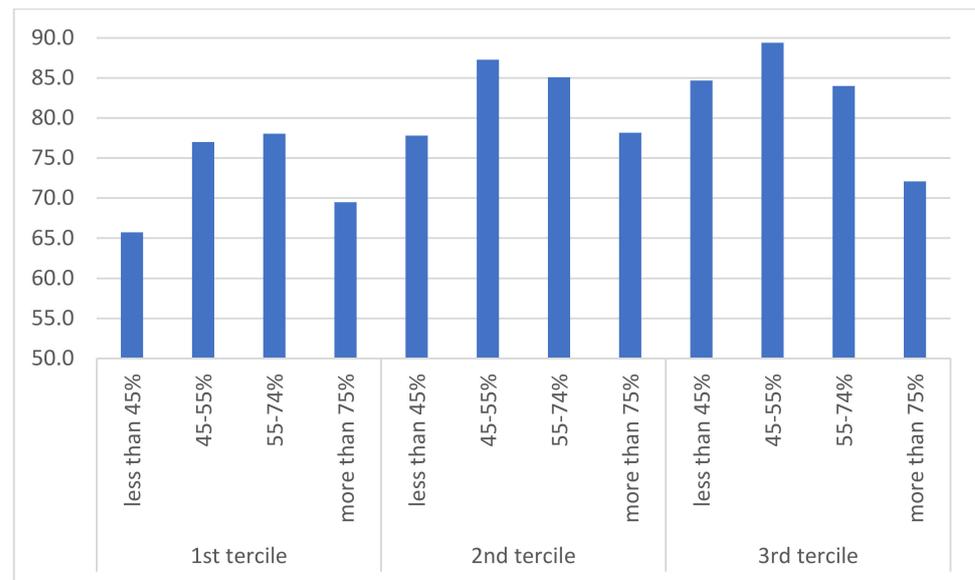


Figure 3. Interaction between father’s relative income and income tertiles for fathers’ use of parental leave up to the quota in Sweden.

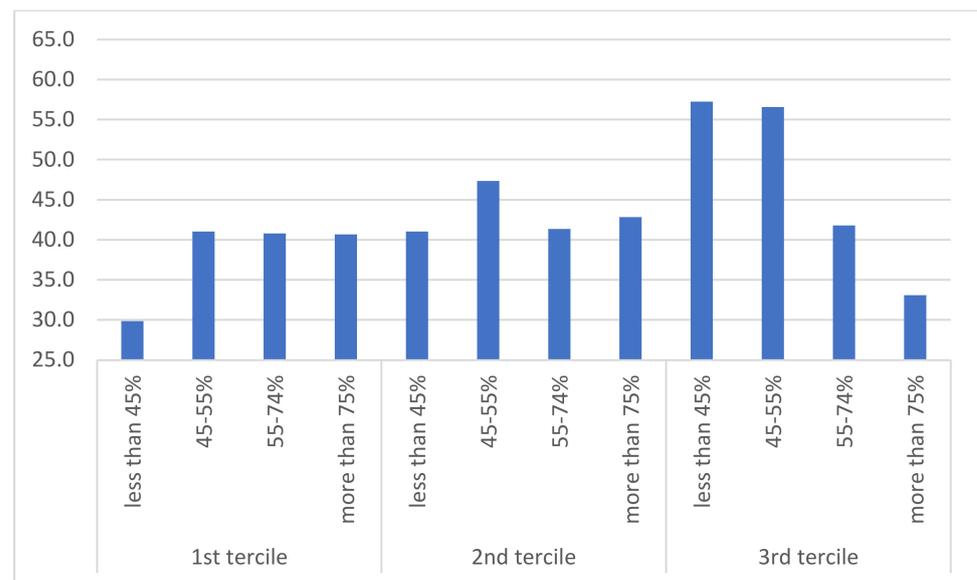


Figure 4. Interaction between father's relative income and income tertiles for fathers' use of shared leave in Sweden.

In the main model, fathers most often use leave in households where partners have similar income levels in both Finland and Sweden. In Finland, for the most part, this turns out to be a quite stable pattern across household income tertiles. The patterns follow a reversed u-shape at all household income levels. However, there is a slight difference between male- and female-breadwinning households at different tertiles. Among the couples with high household income, breadwinning fathers use less leave than fathers in female-breadwinning households. The opposite is true in low-income families. In high-income households, there is a greater economic margin, and perhaps more flexibility in sharing leave leads to the fact that mothers' negotiating power is greater. Additionally, in high-income households it is likely that the mother is more interested in going back to work as her gain is greater than in low-income households.

For the Swedish fathers using any leave, the same pattern is found at all household income levels. There is an inverted u-shape, where equal income most often leads to fathers using the leave. However, for fathers using more than the reserved time (shared leave), the patterns are different by household income. Fathers in low-income households do not use leave as often when the mother is the main earner, and one interpretation may again be that these families cannot afford for the father to take much leave with a low benefit. This is a gendered interpretation as the opposite case, a low-income mother, would probably also mean that they could not afford the father to be home. For middle-income households, we find that in the equal-earning couples, fathers most often use leave above the quota, similar to the Finnish fathers' use of leave and consistent with the strong norm of leave use for fathers in Sweden. For the highest-income couples, an opposite pattern to that of the low-income couples is visible, as it is in households where the mother earns more than the father most often uses leave. As in the Finnish case, the interpretation may be that high-earning women in these couples prefer to return to work earlier and thus have the bargaining power to decide on this. In cases where the father earns more, it seems he prefers not to use a long leave as often, or is restricted from doing so by factors unobserved here.

We are also interested in whether the educational pattern is consistent over the household income levels. Therefore, we present interactions between household income tertiles and relative education in Figures 5–7. For both Finland and Sweden, it seems that at all household income levels, in couples where both parents are highly educated, the father uses leave most often. This finding indicates that education is positively associated with fathers' parental leave use independently of household income. It also reflects a flexible

work situation and positive attitudes to sharing leave among highly educated parents. In addition, at all household income levels, fathers use leave more often in cases where the mother has higher education than the father. This applies to both Finland and Sweden, albeit at different levels. It seems that the mother's higher education encourages, enables or facilitates the father's leave use, even if this association is not sufficiently strong to be significant in the main model for Finland (Table 2). We find the least difference between the mother and the father having the highest education among households with middle income in Finland, and most difference for the shared leave in Sweden for low-income couples.

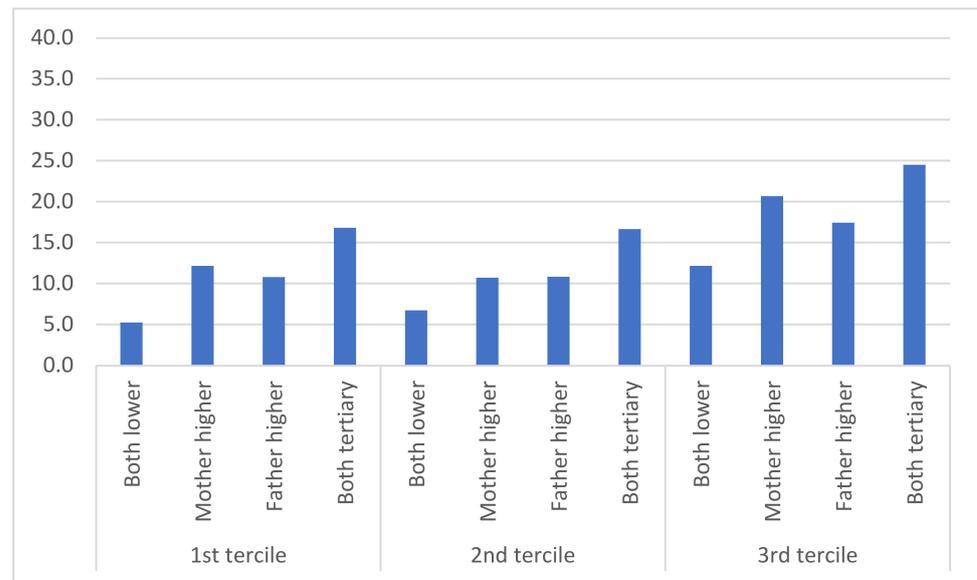


Figure 5. Interaction between relative education and income tertiles for fathers' parental leave use in Finland.

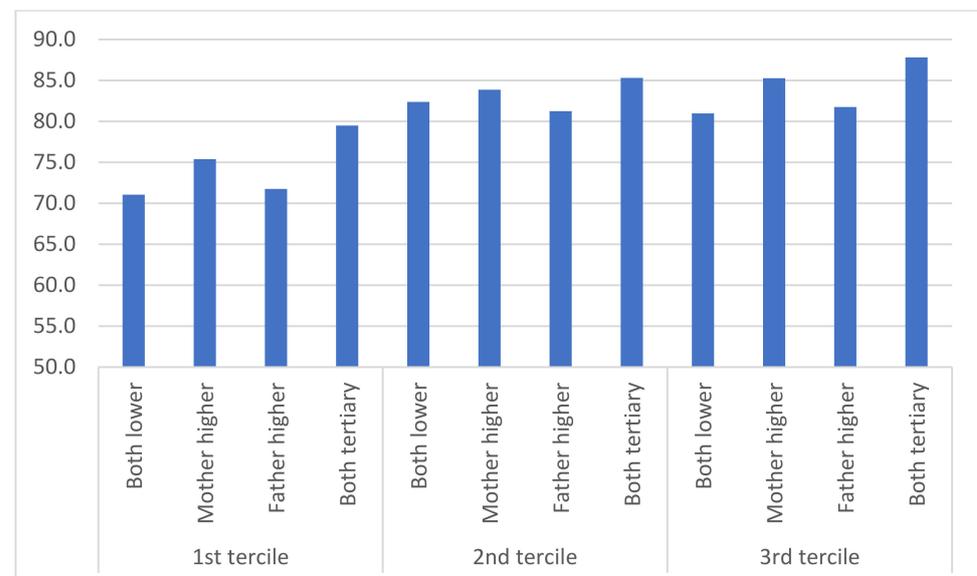


Figure 6. Interaction between relative education and income tertiles for fathers' parental leave use up to the quota in Sweden.

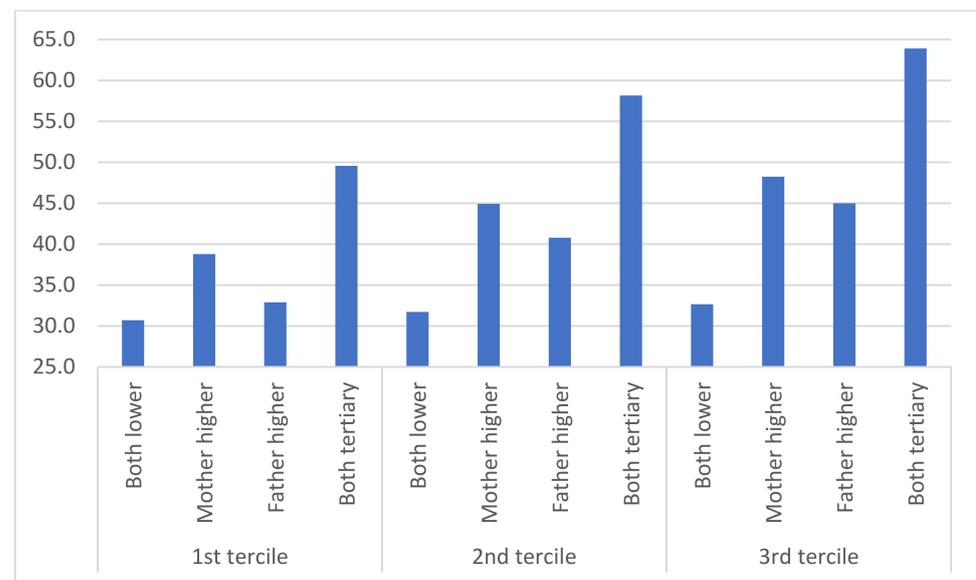


Figure 7. Interaction between relative education and income terciles for fathers' use of shared leave in Sweden.

7. Discussion

We set out to ask whether the associations between couple characteristics at different levels of resources and fathers' leave use were the same in the two differing contexts, Finland and Sweden. We used a time period when these countries had different policy set-ups but were similar in many other aspects. The Swedish system incorporated long reserved leave for fathers, whereas the Finnish system did not provide any truly reserved leave for fathers at the time. Primarily, we examined whether the differences in income and education between parents played out differently depending on policy context.

We find that most of the known factors, primarily income and educational level, influencing fathers' leave use work in similar ways in the two countries. In addition, we find that using the quota and using shared leave are correlated with household characteristics similarly in Sweden, even though the policies imply different negotiation settings. As only the fathers can use the reserved leave, the use is not necessarily as much of a negotiation as using the shared leave is. Despite different levels of leave, it is thus the same characteristics of mainly high education and high household income that facilitate fathers' parental leave use in the two countries. However, we find that relative income and relative education work somewhat differently. Regarding education, it is clear that two highly educated parents are more often associated with a higher propensity for fathers' leave use (and more leave) compared to two parents with low education, regardless of household income. Fathers also use leave more often when the mother has higher education than the father, which may indicate that the mother's higher education gives her power to negotiate the division of leave, and she may also prefer to go back to work somewhat earlier than less educated mothers.

We also find that the general pattern is that if parents have a similar income level, the propensity for fathers to use leave is highest. However, this seems to work somewhat differently at different levels of household income, especially in Sweden. The pattern of fathers using leave in equal-income couples is mainly true for middle-income families. In low-income families in both Finland and Sweden, in cases where he earns more, his leave use is not depressed compared to parents with equal income. When the woman earns more in a low-income household, the propensity for fathers to use leave is, however, lower. In high-income households, it is the opposite case; when he earns more than her, he uses leave less often, and when she earns more, he uses leave more often. This is especially true for using shared leave in Sweden, but there is also a tendency of the pattern by household income in Finland. It thus seems that the income level in the household sets the stage for

any negotiations over fathers' leave use. Low-income households do not have the same economic possibilities to let the father take leave, and gender-equal behavior becomes a luxury for those who can afford it. We can assume that mothers in these households are on leave and that gendered caring norms prevail over economic considerations. We conclude that negotiation power from individual income is used differently at different levels of household income, but similarly in countries with different policy set-ups.

From this study, we may thus conclude that both relative income and education matter for how parental leave is shared in the couple in different policy contexts, but for relative income, this plays out somewhat differently depending on the household income level.

As fathers in households with low incomes use leave much less often, especially when he earns less than she does, it may be crucial to have benefit levels that cover the income loss for these couples. Even slight reductions in income may matter here, for example, a replacement level of 70 percent rather than 90 percent of income may be a considerable obstacle. However, it should be noted that low-income employments also often come with less security, flexibility and control over workload. Therefore, the lower use among low-income fathers in low-income households is likely to also reflect other labor market inequalities, where these fathers' situation is too precarious for them to be able to use leave. Family policy is thus closely connected to labor market policy, and secure conditions in both areas have to exist for family life to become more gender-equal.

Another way to increase fathers' use of parental leave in low-income families is to enforce quotas and thereby create strong incentives for both fathers and mothers to use leave. It is, however, likely that such enforcements work best for higher-income families that have more flexibility in the household economy. It is a fair prediction that the new Finnish policies will lead to more sharing of leave in particular in high-income households.

We interpret the findings to indicate that equal negotiating power is associated with fathers using leave, but that the level of resources in the family matters. Make note that not only the underlying gendered behavior based on attitudes, but also the scarcity of resources, is restricting sharing. Women still take the overwhelming majority of leave, especially among households with low income.

We also find that the relative resources will matter most in context where there is the most room for negotiation, that is, for shared leave in Sweden. Therefore, even when patterns are similar across our models for Finland and any leave and more than the reserved time in Sweden, we find the most variation in leave in this last model. Therefore, a conclusion from our study would be that when fathers and mothers have the same access to leave and with the same incentives to use it, the sharing of leave will increase.

To further understand what influences the sharing of parental leave, a number of factors must be considered. Couple dynamics are the focus of this study, and the relative resources are clearly found to be important. However, an understanding of parents' relative resources must be combined with the economic restrictions of the household because they play out differently at different levels. It seems that these patterns are more or less stable over different policy contexts, at least in Finland and Sweden, for using leave at all and for using more than the reserved time in Sweden. The patterns of use are similar, albeit at very different levels, despite the different negotiation settings.

We conclude that it is the same fathers who are likely to start using leave in fairly similar contexts despite differences in policy set-ups. It may thus be favorable to discuss, compare and learn from other contexts to determine how parental leave policies are used (or not), always keeping in mind the specificity of every context. The recent EU family balance directive [53] will provide an excellent opportunity to investigate how similar policies will be received by different contexts. The directive includes two months of parental leave reserved for each parent, which implies major changes to the regulations in many countries. The directive also includes payment during leave, which is likely to imply even more challenges and perhaps different implementations in EU member states [54]. The aim is obviously more sharing of caring responsibilities between parents and it may be too early to even guess the consequences in various countries as careful comparisons are

needed. The conclusion from this study is that even at different levels of take-up (Finland and Sweden and also the different types of leave in Sweden), equal levels and a high level of resources (income and education) are associated with sharing. This conclusion raises the concern that the gender-equal intentions of the directive will have more difficulties in reaching families with vulnerable labor market situations.

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