Does fathers' uptake of parental leave lead to greater gender equality in the division of domestic labour?
A conceptual review and reflection of the literature

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Summary

- Fathers' leave as a means to increase gender equality in the division of domestic labour within couples with children
  - Mixed evidence, not a straightforward relationship
- Consequently, in this review article, we raise questions about how
    - i) gender equality is conceptualised and measured, and
    - ii) claims around causality are made in the literature concerning the aftermaths of fathers' parental leave-taking.
- Taking parental leave as a lens to see through rather than the destination for the re-distribution of domestic labour and re-formation of gendered behaviours, our review discusses the need for caution when interpreting the findings at face value.

Outline of this presentation

- Motivation
- Review of the literature
- Reflections on the conceptualisation and methodologies
- Issue of causality
- Conclusion

Motivation

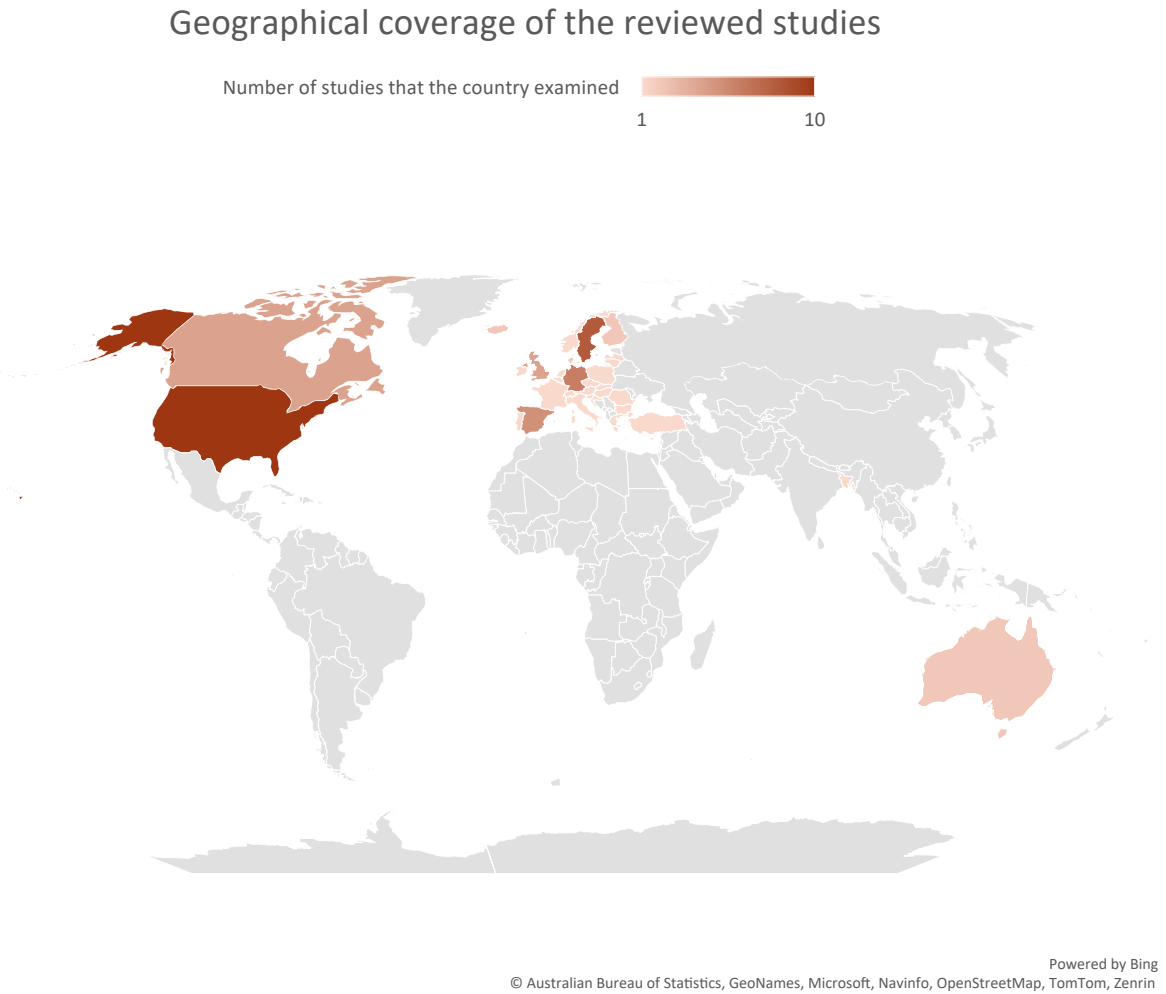
- The literature and policy interests on parental leave policies and father-targeted entitlements have been growing over the past decades
- This growing body of research have focused on various aspects of family life, such as
  - The couple's division of labour in the household both for domestic tasks and for childcare (e.g. Doucet and McKay (2020); Tamm (2019);
  - relationship satisfaction and marital stability (e.g. Avdic and Karimi (2018); Eerola et al. (2019); Twamley (2019); Petts and Knoester (2018)),
  - fertility intentions and outcomes (e.g. Duvander et al. (2019), and
  - child development (e.g. Cools et al. (2015); Huerta et al. (2014).
- less attention has been paid to the issues of how gender equality is conceptualised, measured, and interpreted (Doucet & McKay, 2020).

Our approach

- Identification of the literature
  - To identify relevant peer-reviewed articles written in English, we first conducted a general search on two major electronic databases for academic research, Web of Science and Scopus, with a cut-off date of April 21, 2023, using the keywords ‘father’, ‘leave’, and ‘gender’.
- Screening the titles
  - We then screened the titles and abstracts of all articles, excluding articles lacking relevance, after which the full texts of all remaining articles were reviewed in closer detail.
- Cross-check with recent reviews
  - To supplement this list, we also referred to the referenced articles in relevant review studies (Dearing, 2016; Farre, 2016; Schober & Büchau, 2022) as well as other literature.
- Final selection
  - Ultimately, 42 articles were included for analysis in this review

Literature: fathers' leave take-up and gender equality

- Geographical dominance of Europe, followed by the USA, Canada and Australia
  - Two single-country studies on South Korea
  - Two comparative studies mentioned Bangladesh, Singapore and Turkiye
- 36 of 42 studies used quantitative methods
- 2/3rd (27) of the studies were published in the past decade (2014-2023)
- Forty-one articles contained analysis that operationalised gender equality as fathers' relative or absolute involvement in childcare, while ten articles analysed their involvement in housework. Nine articles contained an analysis of both housework and childcare.



Fathers' leave take-up is associated with their increased involvement in domestic labour

- The involvement in domestic labour (a combination of childcare and housework) is measured in absolute and relative terms. The majority of the studies focused only on the division of labour for childcare, and they looked at correlational relationships
  - **Australia** (Huerta et al., 2014), **Denmark** (Huerta et al., 2014), **Finland** (Eerola et al., 2022), **Germany** (Reimer & Pfau-Effinger, 2020; Schober, 2014), **Iceland** (Arnalds et al., 2021; Arnalds et al., 2013), **South Korea** (Lee, 2023), **Spain** (Arnalds et al., 2021; Fernandez-Cornejo et al., 2016), **Sweden** (Almqvist & Duvander, 2014; Evertsson et al., 2018; Haas, 1990; Haas & Hwang, 2008), **Taiwan** (Yeung & Li, 2022), the UK (Huerta et al., 2014; Tanaka & Waldfogel, 2007), and **the US** (Huerta et al., 2014; Knoester et al., 2019; Nepomnyaschy & Waldfogel, 2007; Petts & Knoester, 2018; Pragg & Knoester, 2017).

Fathers' increased involvement in childcare is also supported by causal evidence, albeit small number of studies.

- The introduction of more generous father-specific leaves to result in some form of greater involvement in the
  - childcare (Tamm, 2019; Wray, 2020),
  - housework (Gonalons-Pons, 2023; Kotsadam & Finseraas, 2011), or
  - both (Bünning, 2015; Tamm, 2019) as seen in a few country contexts such as Canada (Quebec), Germany, the US, and Norway.

Qualitative evidence is also aligned with the findings of quantitative studies

- Leave-taking fathers exhibit a greater sense of responsibility and skills as egalitarian co-parents (Almqvist and Duvander 2014, Rehel 2014, Doucet and McKay 2020, Evertsson et al. 2018)

However, there is also evidence suggesting diverging effects of fathers' leave-taking and gender division of labour in the household

Relative vs absolute increase & task specialisation	• The introduction of paid leave policies in California and New Jersey increased fathers' housework more than mothers' while increasing mothers' childcare more than fathers' (Gonalons-Pons 2023)
Positive increase on contribution to housework	• while the effect on fathers' increased time spent on housework is significant and long-lasting, there is no significant difference in time spent on childcare between fathers who were exposed to the Quebec Parental Insurance Plan (QPIP) and those not exposed (Patnaik 2019)
Unclear contribution to housework	• Despite the positive developments on emotional dimensions of childcare responsibilities, the connection between fathers' leave-taking and their contribution to housework is found less clear (Doucet and McKay 2020).
Issue of self-selection	• One South-Korean study finds that most of the difference between fathers who took leave and fathers who did not is explained by the selection of already involved fathers into leave, suggesting the lack of a causal impact (Lee 2023)

Issues of Conceptualisation, measurement, and interpretation of gender equality

- What equality measure is being used?
  - An absolute measure of contributing to domestic labour may not correspond to a relative increase
  - The data are often collected based on one parent's reporting
    - Qualitative studies capture fathers' own views to a better degree
  - possibly gendered differences between actual and reported housework time in stylised questionnaires, with men possibly overreporting their involvement more than women (Kan, 2008)
  - Non-quantifiable measures of care: such as planning or redistribution of tasks
- Unintended consequences?
  - Is fathers doing more childcare but less housework, trapping mothers into doing more housework?
- Selective contribution:
  - Child-oriented fatherhood ≠ gender egalitarianism

What does gender equality in the division of domestic labour look like?

- As Doucet puts it:

  “Does equality in the family mean that women and men perform the same tasks or spend an equal amount of time performing tasks? Does it mean forcing one partner to perform a task that he or she dislikes but that the other quite enjoys? Should a father go to playgroup where he feels uncomfortable as the only man in the room? Should a mother spend as much time coaching soccer or baseball as fathers typically do? Should fathers share all childcare tasks equally with mothers from the first day of their child’s life? Simply asking these questions reveals the complexity of this issue” (2018, p. 301).

Issue of causality

- Self-selection into leave-taking?
- Dependency on country context?
- Sustainability of behavioural changes?
- Heterogeneity and divergence of experiences: uniform vs multiple pathways to change

Concluding remarks

- We echo researchers who have cautioned against thinking of fathers' leave as a "panacea" (Lee, 2022, p. 155) or "quick fix" (Doucet & Duvander, 2022, p. 134) for gender inequality, suggesting such messages emphasise causality and solution tend to oversimplify the nuanced and complex aftermaths of fathers' leave.
- On the one hand, we must be cautious not to jump to hasty conclusions about the positive causal impact of fathers' leave take-up on gender equality
- We stress the need to pay attention to issues beyond identifying statistically significant positive (causal) relationships and to questions about what precisely is being measured and how findings are being interpreted.
- There remains a need for a wider geographical coverage, expansion in the representativeness of the diverse family forms and a longitudinal approach

Thank you!

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