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## Slow Steps Towards Dual Earner/Dual Carer Family Model: Why Fathers do not Take Parental Leave

Marre Karu\* & Kairi Kasearu

### Abstract

The article looks at the transition of Estonian society towards dual earner/dual carer family model and focuses on fathers' decision regarding taking their parental leave. Based on theory of planned behaviour by Ajzen, data from 20 qualitative interviews with fathers of small children are analysed to explore the beliefs fathers have when it comes to parental leave. The analysis distinguishes between two images of 'good parenting' that play a role in the fathers' intention to take parental leave. First, there is an image of an outcome-oriented 'project manager' affected by failure anxiety, and second, there is a much more relaxed image of a 'good parent' as a 'companion' who values everyday contact and a close relationship with the child(ren).

**Keywords:** family policy, parental leave, fathers, gender equality.

### Introduction

The dual earner/dual carer model, according to which both men and women engage in paid work and care giving symmetrically (Gornick & Meyers 2003:92), has been promoted in Scandinavian parental politics since the second half of the 20th century with quite remarkable success (Leira 2006:29). The fathers' contribution to childcare has increased due to supporting leave schemes, which have been available to fathers already since the 1970s (Rostgaard 2002). In Sweden, 90% of fathers took parental leave already in 1998 (Duvander *et al.* 2010) and in Iceland 88% in 2007 (Einarsdóttir & Pétursdóttir 2010). The employment rate of women in the Nordic countries is as high as 70% in Sweden, 74% in Norway and 68% in Finland (Eurostat 2011).

The fathers' involvement in childcare is expected to advance gender equality in the labour market (Connell 2003, Morgan 2009). The dual earner/dual carer family challenges the traditional, gendered parental practices and presumes a more egalitarian distribution of unpaid childcare obligations between mothers and fathers. To fulfil the conditions of the dual earner/dual carer model, developments in two directions are necessary – the movement of women into the labour market to achieve the 'dual earner' component of the model, and the opposite movement of men to the family sphere and childcare for fulfilling the 'dual carer' part.

Estonia has taken slow steps towards the dual earner/dual carer model. It has been relatively successful in keeping women in the labour market. At the same time, childcare is still the responsibility of women and the participation of fathers in parental leave remains low despite the good preconditions that the Nordic type of parental leave benefit scheme creates. The Estonian Social Insurance Board reports that fathers constituted only about six per cent of the parental leave benefit receivers in 2009 and 2010. It is more a dual earner/state & female carer model that we find in Estonia and the question is what the causes for this slow transition are.

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The current study aims to find out how fathers form their decision of whether to take parental leave or not, and what are the prevalent attitudes that discourage them from making the decision to take parental leave. The analysis is based on 20 qualitative interviews with fathers of small children conducted in 2007. The theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen 1991; 2005) is used here to understand how decisions are formed and what kind of a role different attitudes play. The study focuses on beliefs and fears the fathers have regarding the outcomes of taking parental leave, the expectations of other people and the control and resources they hold over their behaviour. Emphasis is put on perceived behavioural control, which seems to play a significant role in fathers' leave taking. With this analysis, this paper contributes to the in-depth understanding of the slow steps Estonia has taken towards the dual earner/dual carer model.

## Socio-political background of the study

Estonian society is currently characterised by dual earner/state & female carer model. First of all, there is a tradition of relatively high female employment. The employment rate of women (aged 15-64) exceeds the EU average – it was 60% in 2004 and 66% in 2008 (Eurostat 2011). The employment gender gap has been around ten per cent. Therefore, the dual earner component of the balanced dual earner/dual carer family model is well on its way. What is still missing is the dual carer component. The care responsibilities in Estonia are shared between a woman at the early stage of the child's life and the state at the later stage. Within the family, the main care responsibility is still held by the mothers. Therefore, the impact of parenthood on the employment rate of women is remarkable. The employment rate of women with children less than 6 years old remained at around 52-55% in 2006-2010, while it was as high as 74-82% for women with no children in this age group (Statistics Estonia 2011).

Most often the short duration of the leave and economic constraints are mentioned as the main causes why male employees do not take parental leave (Deven 2005). In Estonia, the parental benefit scheme, which was implemented in 2004 and which uses the model from the Nordic countries (Karu & Pall 2009), creates good preconditions for the fathers to contribute to childcare. The parental benefit provides 100% compensation of the previously earned income with a generous ceiling. This allows a father to stay on leave without a threat to his role as a breadwinner. Moreover, the parental benefit is paid until the child is one and a half years old, which is one of the longest durations of full compensation in Europe. Nevertheless, according to Social Insurance Board, fathers constituted only about six per cent of the parental leave benefit receivers in 2009 and 2010, which is a slight increase from below one per cent in 2004 when the new benefit scheme was created. This cannot be regarded as a remarkable shift towards the dual carer model in Estonia. Therefore, in a situation where the most common documented practical obstacles have been removed by policy instruments we need to look elsewhere for the reasons for such a small change.

Here, the historical background comes into play. In the Soviet Union and, thus, also in Soviet Estonia, the dual earner/state carer model was the ideological ideal. There had to be equality on the labour market and full employment of both men and women. Indeed, the 1979 census showed that 96% of women capable to work were employed (Kutsar 1995: 25). The care was institutionalised and it was the responsibility of the state to free women for employment by providing different services (Kelam 1973). Fathers were hardly mentioned in the framework of family and they had no role in childcare. All household tasks, including childcare were found to be unproductive and were to be carried out by state facilities, so that those of working age could concentrate on paid work and production (Kelam 1973).

As pointed out by Karu and Pall (2009), the aims of equality that the Soviet society presented were very modern and European in their essence, but the ways in which these aims were to be achieved differed radically. The ideology of a totalitarian society was forcefully implemented, using punishment and fear that generated a situation where the values imposed by the state did not necessarily match the values of people (Lauristin 1997). However, everyone had to work and mothers of small children were not given any choice either, even if they lacked childcare facilities, which was also often a reality (Narusk 1997). In 1989, for instance, 76% of children in urban areas and 50% in rural areas had a place in formal day care (Kutsar 1991). In reality, therefore, women in Soviet societies bore a double burden of full employment, childcare and household chores (Kocourkova 2002). As a result of gender equality being an ideology unwillingly forced upon people by the Soviet authorities, the concepts of gender equality (Narusk 1997) and also feminism (Marling 2010) have negative connotations in Estonia even nowadays. A similar dual earner/state & female carer model could also be found in other post-Soviet countries, for instance in post-Soviet Russia (Motiejunaite & Kravchenko 2008).

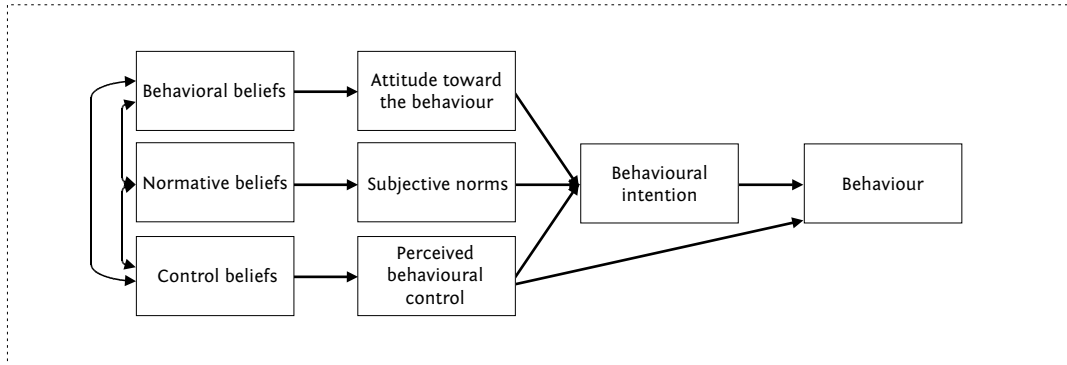
When the Soviet Union collapsed and women faced a freedom of choice of which they had been deprived before, there was a temporary inclination towards going back to traditional gender roles and some backlash towards the male breadwinner model (Hansson 2003). However, this lasted only for a short time, since the economic instability of the mid-1990s produced a new 'no-choice-situation' for women in Estonia (Kutsar 1995). Therefore, the dual earner model was preserved. By now, the dual earner model has become a norm and female employment is strongly supported. A gender monitoring study carried out in 2009 revealed that only six per cent of Estonian women would stop working entirely if their husbands or partners earned enough so they would not have any need to work (Vainu *et al.* 2010: 96).

It was not until the 1990s that first steps were taken towards legitimising a father's role in childcare and fathers became eligible to take parental leave (Karu & Pall 2009). This happened much later than in the Nordic countries where the discussion over the father's role in the family emerged in the 1960s. Swedish policy makers have explicitly recognised that equality for women cannot be realised unless the roles and responsibilities of men are transformed (Haas 1992:217). In Estonia, the leave policies have been implemented with no gender equality aspects in mind. Furthermore, a father's role in childcare was initially explicitly devalued as the access for fathers was restricted to six months, due to the breastfeeding argument (Karu & Pall 2009). The restriction was abolished in 2007 when fathers gained equal rights to parental leave in comparison with mothers.

Lammi-Taskula (2008) points out that together with the mothers' position in the labour market, gender ideology related to care and breadwinning responsibilities are significant determinants of the type of the family/work model. Estonian society seems to support the dual earner model even for families with preschool age children. The gender equality monitoring in 2009 (Vainu *et al.* 2010) showed that 38% of people in Estonia support the solution where both parents work, although they find that women should work part-time; equal division of work and care was supported by 36% and only 18% agreed that the most appropriate solution is to have a male breadwinner together with a female caretaker.

People also support egalitarian sharing of parenting. The gender monitoring revealed that 78% of men 83% and 89% of women agree that men should get more involved in caring for and raising children (Vainu *et al.* 2010). Another study (RISC 2006) pointed out that 76% of the respondents regarded it as natural for fathers to take parental leave and 93% agreed with the statement that bringing up a child is equally the mother's and the father's responsibility.

Thus, people seem to support the dual earner/dual carer model, but social practice (real behaviour of parents) does not reflect this support. The question remains, what are the reasons for this mismatch.



**Figure 1:** Theory of planned behaviour

Source: Ajzen 2005:126

## Theoretical framework of the study

The study analyses the decision-making of fathers using a model proposed by the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen 1991, 2005), which is an extension of the theory of reasoned action (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). According to both theories, people behave rationally, taking into account all available information and considering implicitly and explicitly the implications of their actions (Ajzen 1985). Behavioural intention is the most important determinant of the action and it depends on (1) attitudes towards the behaviour; (2) subjective norms; and (3) perceived behavioural control (see Figure 1). All three elements are, in turn, formed by the person's beliefs.

First, attitudes towards behaviour are determined by behavioural beliefs about the consequences of the behaviour (Ajzen 2005: 126). In this study, the father's attitude towards parental leave is dependent on his beliefs regarding the consequences, benefits and costs of his parental leave.

Second, subjective norms are determined by normative beliefs regarding whether the specific individuals or groups approve or disapprove of the behaviour or whether these social referents themselves engage in it or not. It is important what the father believes the others think of him being on parental leave, what they want him to do and if there are other families in which the father is on parental leave. It does include both the norms regarding what significant others think that the person should do, but also what these significant others actually do (Rivis & Sheeran 2003). Therefore, the behavioural intention is strongly rooted in the societal context, both the immediate surroundings of the person and also the wider context.

The third component, perceived behavioural control, is determined by the perception of control over the behaviour and the actual control the person has (Ajzen 2005:118). In other words, the more confident the father is about possessing the resources to handle the parental leave and the fewer actual obstacles he anticipates, the greater his perceived control over the behaviour should be.

These three sets of beliefs are interconnected and there is also an interaction between them. For instance, the perception of behavioural control may influence the attitude towards the behaviour and vice versa (Ajzen 2005). Also, even if fathers hold favourable attitudes towards parental leave and believe that their significant others would approve of it, they may not take the leave if they do not believe they have sufficient resources or opportunities.

Ajzen (2005:119) emphasises that beliefs do not have to be veridical – they may be biased, inaccurate or even irrational. This is especially true in the case of parental leave when it is something that the father has not experienced before. Many of his beliefs are therefore not based on his direct experience.

For instance, the fact that the father does not believe he is able to take care of the child does not mean that he really would not be. Similarly, the perception of social pressure and the disapproval of others does not mean that this behaviour would be in fact disapproved. Despite this, these beliefs form a cognitive foundation that is a basis for the father's intention and, subsequently, also for his behaviour.

Beliefs are created in and by the environment where people grow up and they are influenced by both, personal experiences and also second-hand information. This information provides a basis for their beliefs about the consequences of their behaviour, expectations of others and also obstacles that may prevent them from performing a behaviour (Ajzen 2005: 134). Therefore, the beliefs that fathers in Estonia have must be interpreted in the social context.

To conclude, the father's intention to take parental leave can be expected to occur if he evaluates this challenge positively, experiences social pressure to take parental leave, and believes he has the means and opportunities to do so. Referring to numerous studies, Ajzen (2005: 119) notes that behavioural intentions do predict the behaviour of people very well – much better than, for instance, personal and other background factors (age, income, values, experience, etc.). The approach developed by Ajzen helps us understand the determinants of the behavioural intentions of fathers eligible for parental leave in Estonia. As Ajzen (2005: 117) emphasises, we must understand human behaviour, not merely predict it, and we must try to identify the determinants of behavioural intentions. It is necessary to explore 'why people hold certain attitudes, subjective norms, and perceptions over behaviour' (Ajzen 2005: 123). The theory of planned behaviour is usually tested using quantitative data and methods of analysis. In contrast, in this study a qualitative approach is used to disentangle the content of beliefs that fathers hold, using the theory of planned behaviour.

## Data and method

The empirical part of the study draws on semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 20 fathers, half of whom had the experience of staying at home with children and the other half did not. The sample of fathers with the parental leave experience was generated through advertisements in online family forums and by the snowballing technique. Fathers were 22 to 60 years old, and there was a variation in their educational backgrounds and number of children. The fathers also held various occupations, for example, IT specialist, chef, technician, musician, civil servant and university lecturer. Fathers with no parental leave experience were on average slightly older and had two or even three children, while fathers with parental leave experience mostly had one child (in 6 cases out of 10).

Some of the fathers who had taken parental leave become sole carers of their child(ren), others stayed at home together with the mother and the child(ren). Fathers were at home with children of different ages, the youngest being only 5 months old. Some fathers without the parental leave experience had either shortened their working hours or taken short leaves from work to stay with the family.

The interviews started by asking the interviewee to describe what comes to his mind first when he thinks of the word 'parent', what makes a 'good parent', and then the interviewer moved on to inquire about his personal journey into fatherhood, including emotions and actions regarding becoming a father. The most emphasis was put on the parental leave decision in the family – how it was made and what influenced the decision about the care arrangements. In case the father had stayed at home, he was asked to describe his experience, his fears and hopes regarding the leave before he stayed at home, reactions from colleagues, family members, other persons, etc. If the father had not stayed at home with the child, he was asked to imagine the experience, the consequences and the possible reactions of others. This approach allowed revealing the father's explicit arguments for and rationalisation behind the decisions he and his family had made, but also to highlight the underlying attitudes, emotions and beliefs behind the intentions.

The interviews were semi-structured, with the main questions and themes given, but the interview was in the form of a conversation to allow for topics also relevant to the interviewee to be followed up and elaborated. The interviews varied from 45 minutes to nearly two hours and were carried out in different locations, depending on the preference of the interviewee (at home, at work or at a location chosen by the interviewer).

The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Following Strauss and Corbin (1990:15), the first step of the analysis was describing the phenomenon, the second step was to code and classify the data, and finally find connections between the categories created. Therefore, the analysis first described the phenomenon: the experiences, context, intentions and processes of a father's parental leave. Then, the data were coded using qualitative data software Atlas.ti. Coding was done in several steps where, first, the interviews were divided into general categories of reasons for taking or not taking parental leave explicitly expressed by the fathers; and second, more salient beliefs that were not directly pointed out by fathers, searched and coded under additional codes. Finally, the interconnections between the themes that emerged from the analysis were discovered and the data were interpreted in the framework of the theory of planned action. Interviews were analysed both vertically, concentrating on different themes across all the interviews, and also horizontally in order to understand and interpret the experiences of each interviewee.

## Results

### How do fathers argue for their decisions

When we asked fathers why they decided to take parental leave or why not, all fathers gave arguments for and against taking the leave, independent of whether they had been on parental leave or not. Fathers with leave experience explained their choice but also named doubts they had. Everyone mentioned several arguments and no one pointed out the decisive factor. Thus, as the theory of planned behaviour also suggests (Ajzen 2005), there is really a whole set of factors that influences the father's decision to stay at home. It was a combination of and interaction between attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control that finally formed the decision.

The data illustrated the different weight of the factors for different individuals. For instance, one father who was convinced that breastfeeding and the close relationship with the mother is extremely significant for the child did not take parental leave, while another one with similar convictions did. Positive behavioural intention may be formed also if there are some negative beliefs present and vice versa.

### Behavioural beliefs and attitude toward the behaviour

Out of all beliefs, the behavioural beliefs, i.e. expected consequences of parental leave, were most explicitly expressed and discussed by the fathers. The sets of arguments fathers provided were relatively predictable, as far as the careers of both the man and the woman, and the well-being of all parties were concerned (the child and both parents). A similar line of argumentation has been also found by Pajumets (2010), who studied Estonian couples and their reasons for rejecting the fathers' parental leave.

Concern over career development and job loss was expressed. Some of the fathers without leave experience were afraid that their career would be put in danger due to negative attitudes of employers, which could lead to job loss.

*To my face they would have said, 'wow, what a father?!', but behind my back they would have started searching for a new employee [to replace me].*

Also, other studies have found that fear of the negative attitudes of the employers towards fathers taking parental leave has been one of the obstacles (see for instance Brandth & Kvande, 2002, Haas *et al.* 2002). Moreover, obligations towards the company, co-workers and clients were emphasised – some men found it impossible to leave their job, since that would mean letting down the company and their colleagues:

*Since my boss also has two children at the moment, his attitude would have been okay, most probably. But the fact is that the department I am leading is so important for the company that if you would take one person away from there for 1.5 years it would mean a very strong setback for the development of the company:*

Fathers tended to feel they were irreplaceable at work, but not at home. They felt that their job and their employer would suffer from their absence, but the family and the child would not. Most paradoxical was a case of a kindergarten teacher who felt a stronger sense of responsibility towards the children in his workplace than towards his own children. He considered taking parental leave to help his wife with their two small children, but found the situation at work very unfavourable as several colleagues were either absent or ill:

*If I disappeared too, it would have been very difficult for them [the children]. Then I decided, as I saw that my wife was so... she was coping so well, I felt I am not harming my family in any way.*

Breastfeeding was another 'natural' reason for fathers not to take parental leave in this study, but also other studies have pointed it out (e.g. Haas 1992, Salmi & Lammi-Taskula 1999, Pajumets 2010). This argument was also presented by fathers who actually took parental leave. There is a belief that the child would suffer from her/his separation from the mother and from the lack of breastfeeding, which were seen as the inevitable consequences of the father replacing the mother at home. One of the fathers who had not been home with a child expressed his disapproval:

*It is not right that a woman who is capable of breastfeeding goes to work and the father starts feeding the child some kind of chemicals because of this.*

Breastfeeding was a significant reason why fathers did not find it possible to become the main carer of the child while the mother returns to the labour market. It was not acceptable for fathers that the breastfeeding would end because of him taking parental leave.

### Normative beliefs and subjective norms

Analysing the subjective norms, i.e. the perceived social pressure regarding parental leave, we found a very clear consensus among all the fathers. The general opinion was that it is very uncommon for a father to take parental leave and it is expected that the mother is on parental leave. Often normality was brought up – fathers felt it is not right or normal that the father changes places with the mother. One father made a direct connection with the Soviet period where the traditional roles were forcefully changed. He explained this position towards fathers on parental leave as following:

*It is not normal, it hasn't been normal throughout the times. It is like the attempt from the recent past to equalise the roles of men and women. A woman had to drive a tractor equally with men and one month old children were thrown into a crèche. Here is some food for thought.*



This directly reflects the reluctance or aversion towards the rhetoric of gender equality due to the fact that it was forced upon people, sometimes in very formal and unusual ways. It clearly shows how the beliefs and attitudes may be rooted in historical context.

As childcare is still associated with women, the masculinity of men on parental leave is questioned. A father's parental leave was perceived as something not to be tolerated and the primacy of his role as an employee over his role as a father was emphasised:

*[Men are] expected to continue to be good workers, children shouldn't disturb their lives – this is what I have perceived. 'You can be a good father and care for your child while you are at home, but if we need you to do something for us then please, don't be a father.' There is a lot of this kind of attitude.*

Involvement in childcare is not perceived as a part of the fathers' role and fathers who do choose differently are regarded either as a bit *different* or less manly. Fathers felt that these fathers who take parental leave may be stigmatised and negative assumptions may be made about their job and their characteristics:

*It's like a niche business. If a man says that he'll be at home with a child, people will interpret this as if he earns less than his wife or has some problems with his job or he is the kind of man who has no need to achieve success, whose aims are somewhere else, who is more home-oriented and has a more relaxed attitude. In this sense, the society does put pressure on you and you have to justify it more than your wife would.*

The fact that taking parental leave sends some kind of message to others was pointed out several times. Usually these messages are not favourable: *that it is not a real man* who takes parental leave and, thus, it makes people question the masculinity of the man.

*I have always been a bit different, I am not much bothered about it, but ... I think I was regarded as a loser.*

Therefore, fathers on leave felt that they needed to justify their decision or provide reasons related to their job or income. These reasons, they thought, were more legitimate and acceptable than the wish to spend time with the child and take part in the care responsibilities. Similarly, focus groups conducted with employers in 2007 showed that employers also explain fathers' participation in childcare or family life by necessity and external factors rather than free will (Karu *et al.* 2007). Some fathers believed that father's leave is seen as a solution in case of an emergency, where the mother is not capable of taking care of the child. One father who spent a lot of time with his child during parental leave in a small town overheard a conversation on a bus regarding his daughter:

*People were saying that this is such a brave girl, an orphan with no mother, she spends all the time with the father, and she certainly doesn't have a mother... [This was] tough criticism towards my wife. But yes, this was the attitude that when the father is outside with the child, then it must be because there is no mother at all.*

While overall attitudes and perceived norms were generally negative, the reactions and attitudes of family, relatives and friends were generally more positive. The experience of fathers also showed that they even experienced admiration regarding their decision and bravery to take on such a complicated task. As Marsiglio & Cohan (2000) pointed out, a father's perception of himself as a father is connected to how people he closely interacts with evaluate and appraise him (Marsiglio & Cohan 2000).

## Control Beliefs and Perceived Behavioural Control

Control beliefs and perceived behavioural control also figured in the interviews as one of the factors influencing fathers' intentions and decisions. Two sets of beliefs seem to form the perceived behavioural control: these concern, first, maternal gatekeeping and, second, parenting skills and expectations. The first of these perceptions indicates that the decision is made in the family and the mother's preferences in this question play a crucial role. The second aspect concerns the fear of failure and the parenting skills and expectations that fathers hold.

### Perceived maternal gatekeeping

Behavioural control in the theory of planned behaviour is a crucial factor, as it takes into account whether the behaviour is under volition of the person. In case of parental leave, the decision concerns the whole family and all the fathers emphasised the wishes and preferences of mothers. It is clear that fathers who had stayed at home had to have the consent of the mother, since it does involve changing the status of the mother as well. As the home and family sphere are arenas where women often hold a more powerful position, it may be expected that mothers have a final say in this question. One set of arguments for taking the leave concerned the mother's wish or need to go to work or study, either due to practical reasons or due to emotional and psychological needs.

In case of fathers without leave experience, we did see two kinds of situations. First, some fathers had discussed this issue to find out the preferences and opinions of the mother. Some, however, formed their attitudes about the mother's position and preferences without having any discussions with the mother. Some mothers implicitly objected to the idea. One of the fathers who wanted to stay at home and who had discussed this possibility with his wife had to abandon the idea due to his wife's resistance. He described his wife as '*not a very social person*' who had her children before she had entered the labour market, no job to return to and no motivation to leave the role of a housewife:

*The question was what would my wife do if I stayed at home? Well, of course, she could find things to do. She could have graduated from her school and think what she could do in the society, what job to find... in that sense she would have many things to do. But her attitude showed that it would have not made any sense. In the case of our family, it was most natural that she stayed at home and I continued working.*

Another father admitted that his partner simply wanted to continue being on parental leave and stay at home:

*It was this question that my partner didn't really want [me to stay on parental leave]. She wants to be at home with the child, it's like a vacation for her and she likes it.*

The fathers, therefore, had to give in because of the preferences of the mother. This phenomenon may be called *maternal gatekeeping* (see more Allen & Hawkins 1999). Mothers indeed may control the access for fathers, but as it appeared, fathers are not always keen on discussing this issue to find out whether dedicating their time to childcare is really what mothers prefer. In these cases, the maternal gatekeeping functioning as a barrier against the father was a belief that did not necessarily reflect the reality.

### Perceived parenting skills and expectations

Another significant aspect of perceived behavioural control is the belief in one's ability to perform. When it comes to the fathers' parental leave, this perception also appears to be crucial. Fathers expressed doubts about having sufficient skills, abilities and other resources to care for their child(ren).

However, not all fathers were talking about fears. We found that the fear of taking parental leave was connected to the way fathers perceived their role as parents. We found that fathers held two very different images of a 'good parent'. The first group of fathers saw themselves as 'project managers' who have to lead their child to a successful life. The other group of fathers saw their role as being a good companion to their child.

#### **Image of a 'Good Parent' as a 'Project Manager'**

First, there were fathers who saw their role as parents as that of project manager. For them, the aim of parenting was to bring up a successful and independent person. The child was treated as a project, which by using the right parenting strategies and by following certain rules should lead to a successful outcome. These fathers, therefore, believe there is a correct way of bringing up a child. One of the fathers felt he was not a good father since he doesn't know when and what to teach to his child:

*For each thing there is a good time when to teach it to the child. I haven't studied it anywhere; I don't know when to teach something. [...] I would like to teach him all kinds of things. But I am not able to. I don't know. Well, in this sense these kindergartens are very good; they have skilled and smart pedagogues.*

When describing their activities together with children, these fathers mentioned playing games that develop certain skills or abilities, watching only those TV programmes that are educational, reading books, etc. One of the fathers prepared extensively for the birth of his child and read books on how to improve the baby's knowledge. He discussed the impact he thought his parenting practices had on the advancement of his older daughter's abilities:

*I don't know, maybe our daughter never had problems with mathematics because we showed her numbers when she was a baby. It was suggested that one should show numbers to a 6 month old baby already.*

Since these fathers believe there are right ways of bringing up a child and they see a direct connection between parental practices and the outcome, they perceive a risk for making mistakes and failing. The position of these fathers is most clearly expressed by a father of two, who actually uses the word *result* while comparing his and his partner's care practices:

*Her care and worry for the child is much stronger than mine. She handles it so much better [...] I wouldn't be sure that the result would have been as good if I were at home instead of the mother.*

Interviews revealed that fathers tend to estimate their competence in childcare to be significantly lower compared to mothers. A widely shared opinion is that mothers are more skilled and competent in taking care of the child due to natural instincts and a biological connection they develop with the child during pregnancy. Fathers tend to believe that mothers can handle household chores better due to their 'natural' advantage. A father, who was on parental leave despite being very scared of childcare, described this belief as follows:

*I felt completely helpless at times. Maybe nature has given women more intuition when it comes to the children. Very often I was extremely anxious. I am not saying that the mother was careless, certainly not, but her threshold of pain was significantly higher regarding the child.*

Thus, fathers who see their role as a project manager and who hold a very strong belief that they are not as good carers as mothers were scared of taking parental leave. They found it better for the child if the mother who knew how to take care of the child would continue taking care of the child.

They felt that there are correct ways of teaching, guiding and shaping the child and that the mother has better knowledge of what these are. However, some of the fathers took parental leave despite sharing this conviction and they admitted they managed well.

#### **Image of a 'Good Parent' as 'a Companion'**

The other group of fathers perceived the aim and process of parenting radically differently. They did not see role of a parent in shaping their child, but rather regarded themselves as being a companion to the child with the role of mediating the world to the child and vice versa. What is important is to react, listen to and be there for the child, not the knowledge or the skills of teaching and educating the child. Here are images of 'good parenting' shared by two fathers who represent this kind of thinking:

*I think that a good father is one who cares for his child, who gets involved, tries to understand his wishes, understand the child, spends as much time with him as possible ... well, this kind of mental closeness probably.*

*We tried to behave according to the child. We didn't make him behave according to us, but the way his needs were.*

These fathers do not have a plan and they do not perceive that there are better or worse ways of caring for the child, as long as the parent is there for a child and puts effort into understanding the child and fulfilling their needs. Their aims and activities were more concentrated on the present rather than the future. These fathers were not afraid of being on parental leave and they did not have a fear of failure, since for them there was no one and only correct and universal way of bringing up a child. Therefore, both men and women were able to care for children in their opinion.

In conclusion, the way parents perceive their role as parents together with their assessment of their parenting skills may have a crucial impact on their belief concerning the behavioural control.

## **Conclusions**

There has been a shift in the cultural definition of fatherhood from 'father as a provider' to 'father as a nurturer' (Atkinson & Blackwelder 1993). At the same time, LaRossa (1988) among others has pointed out that while the culture of fatherhood has changed, the conduct of fatherhood has not changed remarkably. The current study discovered the reasons for the lack of change in the taking of parental leave, which is one of the indicators of the change in the conduct of fatherhood.

The study revealed that the fathers' decision to stay at home with children is not only related to structural opportunities; instead it is a complex mixture of beliefs and norms that mediate the fathers' behaviour in Estonia. There are three sets of beliefs influencing the behavioural intention and consequently the behaviour itself. The first set of beliefs concerns consequences of the leave (concern about losing one's job, jeopardising one's career, advancement within the company). Fathers believe they are more needed at work than at home. Second, the beliefs regarding the expectations and attitudes of others play an important role. Generally, fathers perceive negative attitudes from the society at large towards a father's parental leave and are concerned about the potential stigmatisation. Third, there are beliefs regarding the control the fathers have over their behaviour. Parental leave is a family decision and, therefore, the standpoint of the mother is crucial – without the consent of the mother it is not possible for the father to take the parental leave. When the father believes that he is not capable of parenting well enough when on leave, he does not feel inclined to take the leave.

When we talk about the reasons why fathers do not take parental leave, it is important to point out that in most of the cases we are talking about beliefs about the results of the parental leave, the expectations of others and control over leave-taking. These beliefs may or may not be realistic. The

consequences of the leave are estimated and predicted using prior experiences and knowledge, but in reality fathers do not know what will happen before they actually take the leave. The same goes for beliefs regarding the norms: fathers do not always discuss the subject with others and, therefore, they do not have information about what the real attitudes or expectations of the others are.

The dual carer/dual earner model supposes that both parties feel comfortable in fulfilling both roles. Women are more close to this ideal model than men – they are active in the labour market and at home. Fathers, however, are not yet comfortable in fulfilling the role of the carer. The study shows that the real and perceived lack of competence and control both impact the father's behaviour.

Why do fathers feel lack of confidence regarding childcare? We found that perceived behavioural control is linked to images of good parenting, i.e. expectations that fathers put on themselves. Fathers who took the role of a 'project manager' with the aim of teaching and developing the child in order to bring up a successful person were scared of making mistakes in this process. They believed that mothers have better parenting skills and the outcome would be better if the mother takes the leave. In contrast, fathers who felt that good parenting lies in being a companion to the child live in the present moment rather than in the distant future. They feel that the role of a parent is to listen, to be present for the child, to mediate the world and surroundings to him/her. They are not afraid of making fatal mistakes, do not express fear of failure, and are more inclined to care for the child.

Our findings allow us to conclude that the normative pressure is perceived as something general and attributed to the society or social context, but not directly to concrete persons. The fathers perceive that fathers' parental leave is not accepted by the society (see also Pajumets 2010). At the same time, the quantitative surveys show that people regard it as normal that fathers take some time for the parental leave (Vainu *et al.* 2010). It is possible that despite the fact that the fathers' leave is publicly advocated and stated to be a normal behaviour also in opinion polls, it remains a facade or a mask – a response to the ideology of the gender equality rhetoric. People feel that supporting this idea is expected and they are in a way 'obliged' to be tolerant towards the fathers' leave. In real life, fathers still feel they would be devalued or stigmatised when taking on an untraditional role. At the same time, Marsiglio and Cohan (2000) suggest that the norms associated with fatherhood have actually become more diffuse, that fatherhood is less confined and that individuals have more freedom to construct their own realities.

In conclusion, at the societal level gender equality has gained more and more attention in public and academic discourse (Roosalu *et al.* 2010) and it is also slowly seeping into individuals' argumentation and behavioural beliefs, but normative beliefs are still guided by traditional gender ideology. Thus, there is a contradiction here between individual gender ideology and societal/general gender equality ideology. This inconsistency can be seen as an outcome of the multiple transitions (social, economic, political) in the 1990s. More precisely, there was a shift in work and family related values after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Several authors have pointed out that in the beginning of the 1990s in the context of changed socio-economic conditions, refamilialisation took place whereby women's role as a caretaker increased (Hansson 2003, Saxonberg & Szelewa 2007). At the same time, as stated by Pajumets (2010), men may have oriented themselves more strongly towards work and career development, thus magnifying the gendered divide of carer and earner roles. However, the westernisation of general values and being part of the EU has increased the importance of gender equality.

From the point of view of social policy and equality policies, it may be helpful to consider the fact that many of the factors forming behavioural intention are merely beliefs. Ajzen (2005:136) points out that this knowledge has implications for behavioural interventions that are designed to change intentions and behaviour. When the content of the belief is known, it is possible to change the belief. Therefore, knowledge obtained from this study may be considered for this purpose.

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