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## Polish migrant fathers using parental leave in Norway

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### Abstract

**Objective:** This article explores how the Norwegian care regime impacts Polish migrant fathers' caring practices.

**Background:** The present study illustrates the importance of context sensitive research when describing the consequences of migration from migratory-source countries in Eastern Europe. When a father's labor migration takes place in an institutional context with a care regime which includes earmarked parental leave rights for fathers, it can result in the father having more time with his children.

**Method:** To gain insight into fathers' experiences, in-depth research interviews were carried out with Polish fathers of young children. The majority of the informants live in Norway with their children and partners.

**Results:** A main strength of the present study is the illustration of context-sensitive research when describing the consequences of migration from migratory-source countries in Eastern Europe.

**Conclusion:** The findings in this article show how earmarked leave provides opportunities for the migrant fathers to be accessible and responsible and to interact with their child. These caring practices result in fathers bonding with their children and learning how to care for them. In addition, the migrant fathers experience emotional gains.

**Key words:** care practices, immigrant fathers, care regime, earmarked leave



## 1. Introduction

Research on women's labor migration (Bikova 2017, Hochschild 2001, 2002, 2013, Isaksen 2010,) often points out how the women who migrate to contribute to their family economy pay a high emotional price when they must leave their children. Male labor migrants have, however, been viewed primarily as providers, not as caregivers, and therefore have not been automatically included in this field of research. Doucet (2020) shows how caregiving and economic provisions generally function as complete opposites in research on fathers. Hochschild has also pointed this out: "Much of the research on male migrants has focused on their role as economic providers, not on the emotional costs of their work" (Hochschild 2013 ;137). There is a growing criticism of the lack of a research focus on fathers in the migration field (Dumitru 2014, Yeates 2012,). A new research field is, however, emerging where the caregiving experiences of male migrants are explored (Baldassar and Merla 2014, Palenga-Møllenbeck 2013). As in the international setting, so too in the Norwegian setting, there has been little research conducted on migrating fathers, although the field appears to be opening. Male migrants have been studied mainly in their capacity as workers (Arnholtz et. al, 2015, Dølvik et.al 2006,2009, Eldring, 2007, 2013, 2015). Recently, some studies have focused on how Polish migrant fathers experience and practice gender equality in their families, comparing how parental leave schemes are used in Norway and Poland (Bell and Pustulka 2017. Korsvik and Warat, 2016, Bjørnholt et al.,2017, Bjørnholt and Stefansen 2018,). A study of migrating fathers from Western and Southern European countries has examined how they experienced the institutional ideals represented by the Norwegian father's quota (Brandth & Kvande, 2020, Kvande & Bye, 2016). The findings showed that the fathers looked upon the father's quota as a statutory right which provides generous compensation, and that it was accepted by employers and universally used by fathers.

Immigrants today constitute 14 per cent of the population of Norway, and in addition, three per cent are children of immigrants (SSB (Statistics Norway) 2019 a). Since 1990, 34 per cent are labor migrants (SSB b). Labor migrants from Poland constitute the largest group, and children of migrants from Poland are the third largest group of children born in Norway of immigrant parents living in the country (Østby 2017). Among Polish labor migrants we find men who have family in Norway and those who commute to Poland to visit their families. The concern of this article is to investigate how work migration might affect the father-child relationship. The point of departure is international and national research on fathers, combined with research on care regimes. The article will examine how the Norwegian parental leave system with a father's quota, affects fathering practices of migrant fathers. Polish migrant fathers living in Norway with their families are the informants.

## 2. Fathers care practices – theoretical perspectives

Lewis and Stumbitz (2017) claim that work-family studies in general have neglected context-sensitive research. Working life and social policies exemplify contexts that vary

over time and between countries. The importance of context is demonstrated in the work of (Brandth & Kvande, 2020, Kvande & Brandth, 2014) showing how parental practices can be understood as an interaction between the different institutions of welfare state, labor market and family in various countries that differ between time periods and countries.

In line with this, North American research on care regimes and migration has been criticized for its lack of focus on the role of the welfare-state (Bikova 2017). European research on gender and migration, however, includes the welfare state in the institutional context where care regimes play out (Gavanas & Williams 2008, Lutz and Pallenga-Møllenbeck 2012, Yeates 2012). In this research tradition, gender-, care- and migration regimes are often combined in order to understand how care is divided between the state, the family, and the market (Isaksen 2010).

Over the last 20 or 30 years, the participation by fathers in the provision of care for their children has undergone major changes in many countries. Parental leave programs have been introduced, and studies show how fathers have become more engaged in caring for their children (Dermot 2008, Doucet 2006, Eydal and Rostgaard 2015, Johansson 2011, Miller 2011, Wall and Arnold 2007). While researchers agree that changes have taken place, they do not agree on how comprehensive this change has been because there are large variations across the different institutional and cultural contexts where fathers caregiving takes place. Although middle-class parents in many European countries spend more time on childcare, a new study in the Spanish context attributes this to a cultural shift towards "intensive mothering". This may place great pressure on women's time, minds, and bodies. Such burdens are likely to be related to the gendered division of household roles (Muntanyola-Saura & Sánchez-Mira, 2021, Sánchez-Mira & Muntanyola-Saura, 2020).

Different countries have different national care regimes that, in turn, offer different possibilities for parental caregiving. In the Nordic countries, the dominant care regime for children is based on a model with two providers and two caregivers (Ellingsæter and Leira 2006). Important measures in this regime are parental leave programs funded by the welfare state, which include a leave quota that is reserved for fathers. All the Nordic countries, except Denmark, have introduced this measure (Koslowski et al 2021). Research on fathers has become an established research field where the intention is to analyse historical and contemporary narratives about fathers' caregiving potential and care practices (La Rossa 1997, Lewis 1986). Based on a variety of approaches, researchers have argued that the father's caregiving is important for the child's development. This interest in father's caregiving has led to the development of new concepts, such as "fathers' caregiving", "caring masculinities", and "fathers' care practices" (Brandth & Kvande, 2018a, Dermott 2008, Doucet 2006, 2020, Morgan 1992, 1996,). Lamb (2000) includes three components in "father involvement". In order to satisfy children's needs *engagement* is needed in the sense of a father's direct contact with his child. This includes face-to-face interaction such as playing, washing, changing, and feeding. The second component is *accessibility*, defined as being present, but not necessarily in direct interaction with the child. The last category is *responsibility*, in the sense of organizing and planning the child's caretaking. This might be organizing new or clean clothes or different important activities. In addition to Lamb's three dimensions, the love and emotional bonding in the

father/child relationship is being addressed in recent research on father involvement (Bungum, 2013, Elliot 2015).

In his book *“Rethinking family practices”*, Morgan (2011) shows how parents’ practices are influenced by institutional circumstances. Everyday practices are carried out by people who contribute to building, maintaining, or changing institutional policies and regimes (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006, Smith, 2005). This article will be using the concept “fathers’ care practices”, including the three analytical components developed by Lamb.

### 3. Parental leaves in Norway and Poland

An important part of the Norwegian care regime has been the introduction of parental leave programs. Parents are entitled to parental leave if both have had pension-earning income for at least six of the previous 10 months before the start of the parental leave. The total period of parental benefits is 49 weeks with 100 per cent coverage or 59 weeks with 80 per cent coverage. Incentives for fathers taking part in caregiving are built into the program through the father’s quota, which is currently 15 weeks. This quota cannot be transferred to the mother. Mothers also have their own earmarked portion of leave -- also 15 weeks. In addition, the parents can also share a portion of the leave between them according to their own wishes (18 or 28 weeks). The father’s quota has gradually been expanded from four weeks in 1993 to 15 weeks in 2018. The design of the leave programs reflects the goal of gender equality through the requirement that both parents must have been in paid employment to be entitled to leave (Brandth and Kvande, 2020).

One of the strong normative purposes behind these programs in Norway is the intention to encourage both parents to be caregivers for their children (White Paper Report to the Parliament no. 4, 1988-89). The father’s quota, which was introduced in 1993, is based on the assumption that father’s care is important for children (ibid.). This is the reason why the Norwegian care regime has been called the product of “the father-friendly welfare state” (Brandth and Kvande, 2013). The introduction of the father’s quota as part of the leave system has contributed to making the two-carer model the dominant norm and practice (Brandth and Kvande 2018b, Halrynjo and Kitterød 2016).

The introduction of the father’s quota has been described as a success story (Brandth & Kvande, 2020). Before it was introduced, only four per cent of Norwegian fathers shared the leave time with the mother. After five years with the father’s quota, 85 per cent of fathers were using it. Later this proportion rose to 90 per cent. We find the same development in the other Nordic countries: Norway introduced the father’s quota in 1993, Sweden in 1995, Iceland in 2001, and Finland in 2013. All these countries have long parental leave, which is divided into quotas for fathers and mothers, in addition to a part which can be shared by the parents. Denmark introduced the father’s quota in 1998 but abolished it in 2002. The Danes are now in the process of reintroducing it. The introduction of a father’s quota has also impacted working life. Several studies find that workplaces have little negative effect on parents’ use of leave, emphasizing that in all kinds of work organizations it has become acceptable that fathers use their father’s quota and go on parental leave (Hagen 2017, Halrynjo and Kitterød 2016, Naz 2010). Research

from Finland and Sweden (Haas and Hwang 2009 Lammi-Taskula 2007, Närvi and Salmi 2019) also find that very few fathers who take parental leave get negative reactions from their workplaces.

However, in many European countries, including Poland, the dominant care regime continues to be the mother as caregiver and father as provider, making it difficult for fathers to take on caregiving. Poland has recently changed its parental leave system from a maternal system to a sharable model, opening up for fathers to take parts of the leave time. Parental leave has now been transformed into a gender-neutral model offering 32 weeks off from work, with fathers allowed to share parts of the leave (Kurowska et al. 2021). It is mandatory for mothers to take twenty weeks of leave time, while fathers can take up to two weeks' leave in connection with the birth. Only 32 weeks per family can be taken in total (e.g. if the mother takes 30 weeks, the father can take only two weeks). The Polish leave schemes do not provide the same rights for paternal leave as Norway does. Data on take up indicate that parental leave is taken mostly by mothers in Poland (Kurowska et al. 2021). Although the Polish leave schemes are gender neutral in the sense that it is possible for fathers to take a part of the leave, the low percentage of Polish fathers taking leave indicates a traditional gendered practice.

The labor force participation of Polish women is low compared to other EU Member States (European Commission, 2015). According to the leave policy, mothers have the right to return to work after parental leave, there is, however, no comprehensive effort to provide kindergarten coverage (Bjørnholt and Stefansen, 2017). It is reasonable to assume, that this fits well with traditional Catholic family values.

#### 4. Implementation and method

The analysis of Polish fathers' uses of parental leave is based on data from the work with the project: *The Norwegian childcare regime in the context of transnational migration: Challenges and paradoxes*. To gain insight into the fathers' experiences in-depth research interviews were carried out with Polish fathers of young children. The majority of the informants live in Norway with their children and partners, but the children and family of one of the informants moved back to Poland while he continues to work in Norway.

The recruitment of informants for the interviews started in the spring of 2017. Recruiting Polish fathers of young children for interviews in this project was no easy task. A Polish-speaking sociologist was hired as a research assistant. She used her established contacts in the Polish community, Facebook groups, and people she knew through the Polish Church and the Polish Association in Norway to find potential informants. Our research assistant was able, thus, to contact various Polish migrants who had established themselves in Norway with their families and with employers offering more stable working conditions than is the case with workers on temporary contracts. It is quite clear that the group of Polish labor migrants who have settled with their families in Norway, constitutes a significant proportion of the Polish labor migrants in the country (Statistics Norway 2019b).

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In spite of the access to the Polish community through our research assistant, we still encountered problems finding informants willing to be interviewed. One reason for declining to participate was that caregiving was a topic about which men had nothing to say. Thus, it could easily be considered that the fathers who agreed to be interviewed were among those with a positive attitude about fathers participating in caregiving for children. Several of the fathers were also sceptical because they believed that we represented the Norwegian state authorities, and several also expressed a fundamental distrust of the Norwegian child welfare service. Vassenden and Vedøy (2019) point out that migration issues related to the child welfare service have been topics of public debate in Norway for three decades, with foster care being a particularly intractable concern. With the onset of the decade beginning in 2010, however, matters have intensified and taken on transnational dimensions. Vassenden and Vedøy (2019) emphasize in particular how digital and social media have contributed to the recent changes. Even if fear of the child welfare service was not primarily related to negative personal experiences on the part of the informants, this brought to mind a number of ideas about the child welfare service the informants described as common among minorities in general (Vassenden and Vedøy 2019). Bearing these findings in mind, this may be one of the reasons why several people declined to serve as informants in our study.

Nonetheless, both recruiting and interviewing informants would have been difficult without a competent Polish-speaking research assistant. Half of the interviews were conducted in the spring and autumn of 2017, while the remaining interviews were carried out in spring of 2018. Most of the informants spoke little Norwegian and limited English. We see that it is a strength in the material that the informants spoke Polish in the interviews, which allowed us to have in-depth conversations that gave good room for expressing nuances. This also poses some clear challenges with respect to reliability, because of what might have been omitted or added in the translation processes.

The material consists of a total of 11 interviews with Polish fathers of young children, where seven of the 11 fathers have used parental leave. Since our focus in this article is on Polish migrant fathers and their experiences with parental leave, these seven interviews are included in the analysis. The seven fathers are presented in table 1. There is some variation among the seven fathers when it comes to educational and vocational backgrounds. All of them have permanent positions, except for the academic, who is in a temporary contracted position.

Most of these fathers who have used the father's quota have been residents with their families in Norway for between five and 12 years. In this analysis we examine the care practices of the seven informants in our sample. All the informants had the experience of migrating to Norway to work and establishing themselves here with their children and partners. Six of the informants have children with mothers who also have employment in Norway and have earned the right to parental leave. All the fathers have recent experiences with the father's quota. Six of the fathers have lived permanently in Norway with their families for several years, but the spouse and child of one of the informants returned to Poland while he remains in Norway so that he can provide for his family. Our approach in the analysis was inductive, using textual coding of the informants' stories. Furthermore, we used three key elements in fathers' caregiving (Lamb, 2000), to analyse the care practices and gain insight in the fathers' involvement in childcare. Using the

situations of these informants, we illuminate fathers' care practices, both for fathers who have lived continuously in Norway with children and spouse, and fathers who have experience with long-term absence from their children.

*Table 1:* Informants, leave length, number of children, educational background

Informant Fictitious name	Experience with leave/ father's quota	Number of children/places of birth and residence	Educational/vocational background
"Fabian"	3	Three children born in Norway. The children, father and mother lived in Norway at the time of the interview	Trained in environmental drainage engineering
"Daniel"	2	Two children born in Norway. The children/family lived in Norway at the time of the interview	Trained car painter, locomotive-driver NSB (railroad)
"Arthur"	2	Two children born in Norway. The children/family lived in Norway at the time of the interview	Unskilled/road construction
"Oskar"	2	Two children born in Norway. The children/family lived in Norway at the time of the interview	Trained cook
"Emil"	1	Two children, the first born in Germany, the second in Norway. The children, father and mother lived in Norway at the time of the interview	Doctoral fellow at university
"Dominik"	1	One child born in Norway. The mother moved with the child back to Poland while the father remained in Norway to work at the time of the interview	Engineer/landscaper
"Tomasz"	1	Two children, the first born in Poland when the father worked in Germany, the second child born in Norway. The children, father and mother lived in Norway at the time of the interview	Trained scaffolding foreman

*Source:* Data from the project "The Norwegian childcare regime in the context of transnational migration: Challenges and paradoxes" NTNU, (2017)



## 5. The care practices of migrating fathers

The overriding question in the analyses is which *care practices* the Polish migrant fathers adopt and how these are formed in the encounter with the leave programs as an institutional system? The focus is on the father/child relationship. We have used three elements of paternal caregiving in the analysis, which are important in order to satisfy the child's needs: *accessibility*, *engagement* and *responsibility* (Lamb 2000). Thus, we explore how these elements influence the paternal care practices in the encounter between labor migration and parental leave programs for fathers.

### 5.1 Bonding with the child

Arthur has used the father's quota with two children while his wife has worked. He claims that he learned a lot with the first child: "I must admit that initially, when the first child was born, I was simply afraid to bathe him, change his diapers and stuff like that."

But with the second child he felt he had mastered these tasks: "The first time I was looking so much forward to leave time, but I didn't think it would be so hard, so tiring, that it was such a huge responsibility." Arthur thinks that the father's quota is an opportunity for fathers, and that being alone with the child, without the mother close by, is important: "When the children are young and at home with the mother for long periods of time, they become so bonded with her. Therefore, it's important that the father has his own time with the child that can create a good relationship."

Not all the fathers using the father's quota have this "home-alone" time with the child, however, because much of the time coincides with the mother's vacation. Research on Norwegian fathers' use of the father's quota shows that the fathers who have "home-alone time" with the child feel the same way as Arthur, that this time is precious for the bonding between the child and the father (Branth & Kvande, 2013, Bungum, 2013, Kvande & Brandth, 2017).

Fabian is one of the most experienced users of the father's quota in our study. He and his wife have lived in Norway for almost 11 years. They have had three children here and he has used the father's quota for all three children and talks about this as a positive experience: "I think that the opportunity to take the father's leave is simply fantastic. Having the opportunity to look after your kids is a wonderful experience."

In Fabian's narrative about everyday life with the three children (7 years, 4 years and 10 months old) he reveals how he would routinely start his day at 5.30 a.m., preparing breakfast and lunch packs, then waking the children, and getting them ready and dressed. "When we go, it's a little like a pilgrimage," he says with a smile, telling us how he puts the youngest in a pram, takes one boy to school, the third to kindergarten, then walks with the dog and the child in the pram before returning home. The father's quota has given him the opportunity to be more accessible and assume more responsibility for his children, and he underlines that "the children see that I'm home, they see that I'm there for them". Not having other family members nearby who can help with day-to-day matters means that Fabian sees his current care practice as particularly important for the children. He tells us how this has a positive impact on their relationship "I spend much time with

the children, we're close, we love each other." Being accessible for the children and spending a lot of time with them has a positive effect on their emotional ties and bonding. In Fabian's story we recognize all three elements in Lamb's theory. He is responsible for getting the three kids dressed and ready to go to school and kindergarten. He must be accessible for his children all the time because the mother is not there. This also leads to his interacting and engaging with his children.

In spite of this, Fabian reacts to the coercive nature of the parental leave program and thinks it is wrong that the mothers cannot use the father's quota weeks if the father does not have the possibility to use them.

*"I think the program is wrong on this point, that the father is forced to take the father's quota. There are many different situations, and sometimes a father must work, and mothers can't go to work when the child is so little, so why can't a mother take the ten weeks instead of the father? An unused father's quota shouldn't just disappear into thin air."*

He is here reacting to the non-transferrable portion of the father's quota, but even so, this is precisely what leads him to use the program and take leave from work to be home with his children. The paradox here is that, even if he is critical of the "coercive nature" of the program, he is also very happy about having the possibility of being the caregiver for his children. In this way we also see that labor migration combined with an institutional program such as the father's quota creates caregiving practices involving the father's presence and bonding with one's child.

## 5.2 Emotional gains

Several of the fathers also talk about how their time with their children represents an enrichment in their lives. When they interact with their children, a change occurs which alters their perspectives on life. Emil was highly dedicated to his job in a university position. He was a first-time father and when he started his leave, he feared that he was losing out:

*"One must learn to find delight in different things. It was frustrating, I lost control, I wanted to read or call someone, but had to prioritize the child. However, after a while I changed my approach, I started to think that it is so nice with children." Emil tells us that he eventually managed to relax more and to live in a different way with his child. His day-to-day routines changed. For example, he would take a nap in the middle of the day with his son. "We slept together, it was so nice, I woke up, birds were singing, the sun was shining and by my side was my little son. The meaning of life changed."*

We recognize this steep learning curve which appears when the mother goes to work, and the father has to be responsible and accessible for the child. Learning to interpret the speechless signals from the baby requires engagement and understanding. The reward comes in the form of the emotional bonds and the close relationship established between the child and the father.

Based on fathers' care practices, Elliott (2015) examined how masculine identity is changed through the integration of caregiving values, emotions and mutual dependency with children's needs. Practicing caregiving also leads the caregiver to feel loved and to develop caring competence. Interviews with fathers who have been home alone with their children for an extended period using the father's quota promotes the development of relational competence in the fathers (Kvande & Brandth, 2017). Close emotional ties are developed between the father and the child. When the child comes to the father for comfort just as often as to the mother, the father's self-confidence grows, and he feels that he has acquired caregiving competence. The fathers also describe caregiving as hard work. When a father was home for a relatively long period with his child, he experienced the emotional intimacy and total commitment needed to care for a small child (Hanlon 2012).

### 5.3 Learning how to care

The father's quota and the father's leave time can be a learning process. Several of the fathers have had the experience of being alone with their children while the mothers were at work, which means that they had the main responsibility for a substantial period of time. Daniel's wife is from Indonesia, they live in Norway and have two children who were born here. When Daniel used his father's quota, they travelled to Indonesia, but he was also home alone with the children for five weeks in Norway while his wife worked. He tells us how he learned how to do care work:

*"I think the father's quota is an excellent program because it creates good relations between the father and the children. Now we really share everything, changing nappies, preparing food, bathing the children and everything. It's a wonderful way of doing things."*

This may be understood as support for spousal equality, but it may also be interpreted as pride that he is able to master caring for the child and that his care practice now is just as good as the mother's practice. Mastering the tasks that belong to caregiving boosts the self-confidence of fathers. Several of the informants told us that they were surprised by how demanding it is to be a caregiver for a toddler. Having responsibility for a young child is a happy experience, but it is also a learning process with uncertainty and frustration. In research on Norwegian fathers' experiencing having the responsibility alone for a long period (Brandth & Kvande, 2020, Kvande & Brandth, 2017), the fathers call learning care work "hard work" and an "eye opening experience ". This challenges their previous understandings and leads them to have greater respect for care work.

Oskar was also interested in how he could use his time to create close relations with his children: "When in my role as the father I'm with my children, it binds us together – we forge deep relations". This relational effect impacts his time use. Working as a cook, Oskar had generally worked evenings and had a lot of overtime, but after he had children, he asked to work in the daytime, even if, in his profession, this means fewer challenging duties (lunch dishes instead of dinner); in addition, he rarely works overtime any more: "I would rather give my children my time than toys and candy because time is most important," he says.

#### 5.4 *From caring to providing- emotional costs*

Dominik and his wife had lived for two years in Norway when they had their first child. Dominik had trained as an engineer in Poland, and his wife had trained as a teacher. In Norway he found employment as a landscaper in a private company, while his wife got a job as a cleaner. Both had accrued leave rights when the child was born. Working as a cleaner gave the wife health problems. They agreed that she would take all of the leave that could be shared, while Dominik took the earmarked father's quota weeks. The child was born in Norway, and during the mother's leave the family continued to live there. During this period Dominik had normal working hours: "During my wife's leave, when we still lived in Norway, I worked only eight hours a day, and didn't take overtime, now I call this coming home early from work (laughs)."

He described his work situation and an employer who is demanding when it comes to working hours and overtime requirements. When it was time for Dominik to use his father's quota, the couple therefore decided to return home to Poland. "I was completely free in my leave time, I also insisted that we should go to Poland because I assumed that my employer would call me back to work during my leave to shovel snow. I would simply rather be with my family." The father's quota as an institutional program gave Dominik an opportunity to draw the line with his employer. His wife had quit her job as a cleaner in Norway when she took her leave. Dominik therefore was with his wife and child during his leave time. He insists that we should understand that he had spent a lot of time with his child during the leave: "I did everything, changed nappies, played, prepared food, bathed and cuddled. Everything! I think the most important thing when it comes to be a good father is to spend time with one's child and to be close."

Nonetheless, time and being close to the child was the sore point for Dominik when he was interviewed. When his leave was over, he had to go back to his job in Norway so that he could provide for his family, while his daughter and wife remained in Poland. He also acquired an extra job in the evenings and weekends to earn more because now he most of all needed to provide for his family. Thus, Dominik has had the experience of going from being a present father to being an absent provider. He lives in the field of tension between provision and caregiving, and his narrative testifies to the huge emotional costs that come with assuming this responsibility as a financial provider for his family and having to migrate, as pointed out by Hochschild (2013). The emotional costs are expressed as longing and frustration in the conversation with Dominik, he misses his daughter, and he often has conversations with his wife and daughter on the phone.

*"I talk with my wife and daughter four or five times every day, and we see each other on Messenger. She (his daughter) smiles to me and we have good contact, she says "daddy, daddy" and is so happy. I'm certain this is the result of the leave time we spent together".*

He tries to maintain the caregiving practice from the leave while he also makes it clear that life now is not how he wants it to be: "I don't want to live like this. Now my wife lives in Poland, but we'll live together again, either in Norway or Poland. His longing for and missing his daughter and family pervade the conversation with him. He is trying to maintain the relationship he established with his daughter during the first year by having

contact through a smartphone screen but makes it clear that this is not how he wants things to be. Dominik's situation is an illustration of how the labor migration of fathers may be a mix of closeness and absence, caregiving and care deficit.

### 5.5 *From providing to caring*

Tomasz and his wife lived in Norway with two children, the older child was born in Poland, the younger one in Norway. When the first child was born in Poland, Tomasz was in Belgium with a job in construction. He then asked his employer to have three weeks off to be with his child and visit his family:

*“The boss, a woman, told me straight out that, if I went to Poland now, she might not have a job for me here when I returned. It was like a gamble: if I went to Poland, I could lose my job. But I went, to our first-born in Poland. Three weeks later it turned out that they didn't want me back.”*

In order to be able to provide for his family he again left them – this time, for a job in Germany. This work migration meant that he would not be seeing his daughter more than two or three times during the first ten months of her life. Later he got a job in Norway, and then he migrated with his wife and daughter. When the second child was born in Norway, he had earned the right to parental leave, Tomasz therefore took ten months' leave with the second child, while his wife worked mainly from home. He explains: “I used all the leave I could get when my son was born. Now I didn't want to miss out on all the beautiful moments with my children.” He illustrates how, as an institutional stakeholder, he saw the opportunities in the leave system. The family was partly in Norway, partly in Poland and travelled in several other countries. “My wife needed only her PC to do her job, while I was together with the children. It was a very good time.” He compares himself to other Polish fathers and labor migrants and he also refers to his personal experiences of being a father who was forced to leave his children and family.

*“I really feel for the fathers who work here in Norway while their families live in Poland. They visit their families perhaps every third month. It's clear that some don't have the possibility to see their children more often, it isn't good, and it shouldn't be like this.”*

He wanted to be close to his children and grasped the opportunity parental leave gave him. We see that his experiences with his leave time with the children gave him the opportunity to provide care in person. “During my leave time it was work 24/7,” he laughs. His wife needed to work at the same time, and he was responsible for taking care of the children. He believed that he had satisfied all his fathering obligations: “I changed nappies in the night, played and talked with them. Certainly, I would say that this is the toughest job I have had in my life.”

Tomasz has experienced what it is like to be unable to see his child; therefore, he appreciates the opportunity to take responsibility for his child. He appears to have internalized the institutional and normative ideals inherent in the Norwegian parental

leave system. He also argues that parts of the leave time should be reserved for fathers: “In a way the father’s quota is a form of coercion, but I think it’s great because it removes the idea that men should only be macho. I believe that when I have taken leave, then I show the other fathers that it’s good, perhaps they see me and take leave too.” When he missed “the beautiful moments” with the first child, this gave him a care deficit, for which he later compensated by using the time allowed by the leave system in Norway to be with his second child.

## 6. Conclusions

This article has addressed the caregiving practices of Polish migrant fathers who are established in Norway with their families. In doing so, this article has addressed the growing criticism of the lack of a research focus on fathers in the migration field (see Dumitru 2014, Yeates 2012). Based on interviews with Polish migrant fathers we have explored how the Norwegian care regime influences their caring practices, thus demonstrating the importance of including the welfare state in the institutional context where a migrant’s care practices take place. In the context of a parental leave system which includes earmarked rights for fathers, the father can be accessible, responsible, and able to interact with his child. These caring practices result in fathers learning how to care and bonding with their children. In addition, the migrant fathers experience emotional gains. Through interaction with their children, a change occurs which transforms their perspective(s) on life. The fathers relate how caregiving for children may be all-consuming and much harder work than they had at first believed. They do, however, highlight that having time alone with their children while the mother is at work is important for developing their relationships to their children.

There are clear similarities between the experiences of these Polish fathers during the period of leave and what has been found in earlier studies of the experiences of Norwegian fathers and North and South European fathers (Brandth & Kvande, 2020, Kvande & Brandth, 2014, 2016, Kvande & Bye, 2016). The findings also show that the father who goes from being a present caregiver to becoming an absent provider commuting to his country of origin, longs for his children and feels frustrated, even though he may attempt to maintain the relationship with his child through smartphone screens. Experiences of leaving a child to work involuntarily as an absent economic provider may also fuel extra motivation to recoup what was lost, “not missing the beautiful moments,” as one of the fathers put it about taking leave time. Even if the Polish fathers in the study are happy about the time they have spent and the relationships they have established with their children through the father’s quota, there is a certain degree of ambivalence concerning the coercive nature of the Norwegian earmarked and non-transferrable father’s quota program

A main strength of the present study is the illustration of context-sensitive research when describing the consequences of migration from migratory-source countries in Eastern Europe. Father’s caring practices can be impacted by institutional contexts which include special rights for fathers in their care regimes. Thus, migration can influence

people's practices and norms about what is desirable and possible for fathers to do (Liversage 2014, Brandth & Kvande, 2020). It is, however, important to acknowledge more variation and heterogeneity in care practices among Polish migrant fathers living in Norway, than what has been seen in this study. In addition, it is an open question what impact these experiences might have in the long run, including possible returns to Poland later on.

### Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study can be available from the corresponding author, upon request.

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## Information in German

### Deutscher Titel

Wie Väter mit Migrationshintergrund aus Polen ihre Elternzeit in Norwegen nutzen

### Zusammenfassung

**Fragestellung:** Dieser Artikel untersucht, wie das norwegische Betreuungssystem auf die Betreuungspraxis von Vätern mit Migrationshintergrund aus Polen auswirkt.

**Hintergrund:** Die vorliegende Studie zeigt, wie wichtig kontextsensitive Forschung ist, wenn die Folgen der Migration aus osteuropäischen Herkunftsländern beschrieben werden. Wenn die Arbeitsmigration eines Vaters in einem institutionellen Kontext mit einem Betreuungsregime stattfindet, welches das Recht auf Elternzeit für Väter vorsieht, kann das dazu führen, dass der Vater mehr Zeit mit seinen Kindern verbringt.

**Methode:** Um einen Einblick in die Erfahrungen der Väter zu erhalten, wurden Tiefeninterviews mit polnischen Vätern kleiner Kinder geführt. Die meisten Befragten leben mit ihren Kindern und Partnerinnen in Norwegen.

**Ergebnisse:** Eine wesentliche Stärke der vorliegenden Studie ist die Veranschaulichung der kontextsensitiven Forschung bei der Beschreibung der Folgen der Migration aus den osteuropäischen Herkunftsländern.

**Schlussfolgerung:** Die Ergebnisse in diesem Artikel zeigen, wie die Vätermonate den Vätern mit Migrationshintergrund die Möglichkeit bieten, erreichbar und verantwortlich zu sein und mit ihrem Kind zu interagieren. Diese Betreuungspraktiken führen dazu, dass die Väter eine Bindung zu ihren Kindern aufbauen und lernen, wie sie für sie sorgen können. Darüber hinaus erfahren die Väter mit Migrationshintergrund emotionale Vorteile.

**Schlagwörter:** Betreuungspraktiken, Migrantenväter, Betreuungsregime, Väterzeit

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