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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Koslowski, A. (2023). Review article: Parenting leaves, workplace characteristics, male health, and the pandemic: Currents in policy-related fatherhood research in higher income countries. *JFR - Journal of Family Research*, 35, 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.20377/jfr-820>

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## Review article: Parenting leaves, workplace characteristics, male health, and the pandemic: Currents in policy-related fatherhood research in higher income countries

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### Abstract

**Objective:** This review article provides an overview on the state of policy-related fatherhood research in high income countries.

**Background:** The review article focuses on four main currents of multi-disciplinary policy-related fatherhood research. The first considers the research on national level parenting leaves. The second explores research on organisation and workplace policies. The third presents research on policies around male health and fatherhood practices. The fourth looks at the impact of COVID-19 related policies on fathers.

**Method:** This is a review article and so presents a review of the literature. It is not a systematic literature review but rather aims to show the benefit of multi-disciplinary conversation within fatherhood research.

**Results:** Commonalities are found across the four policy-related areas in terms of key questions, but also in terms of research gaps.

**Conclusion:** There is consensus around what works for engaging fathers across policy contexts. There is perhaps a paradox in that 'de-gendered' policies are usually most effective, but that fathers need to recognise that these degendered policies are for them.

**Key words:** fatherhood, fathers, childcare, leave policies, flexible working, paternal health, COVID-19



## 1. Introduction

Conjure the image of a father pushing his baby along in a pram in a park full of trees. Now, imagine what day of the week it is.

How you respond to this invitation is likely to vary according to where the park under consideration is located. In Stockholm, it is relatively usual to see men pushing infants in their strollers, say at around 11am on a Wednesday morning. If you are living in London, you might regularly see men taking their small children out to the park, but rarely on a Wednesday. Rather, in London, if you see a man with a pram, it probably means that it is the weekend.

Whether it is a Wednesday or a Sunday is typically linked to the social and health policies that a country has in place to help parents to participate in infant care and to remain in employment. The attitudes of employers in that country to the role of fathers as carers is also likely to play a part. In turn, the social policies that a country has in place is linked to normative gendered frameworks for parenting practices. Social policies may change normative practices and normative practices certainly influence policies.

Fathers' care work is more likely to be considered 'optional' or 'secondary' as compared to mothers' care work. We talk about involved fathers, but not involved mothers, as this is universally assumed. There has been much change to gendered norms around parenting in recent decades and the experience of fatherhood is different to that of previous generations (e.g. Adler & Lenz, 2016; Dermott & Miller, 2015). However, fatherhood cannot be said to have become synonymous to motherhood and this is very much reflected in most of the various policy frameworks which relate to fathers, though degendered policies are appearing. This review article considers some of the main areas of policy-related fatherhood research in recent years, with one aim being to promote the benefits of a multi-disciplinary approach.

Some scholars tend to emphasise the differences, looking to pin down the distinction between 'mothering' and 'fathering', whilst others emphasise the similarities between parents and argue that we can and should be aiming towards de-gendered parenting and degenderized family policy (Saxonberg, 2013).<sup>1</sup> Recent trends in gender studies to move beyond gender and sex binaries have not yet found their way into much fatherhood research. Arguably, this is because the binary biological category 'male/female' remains a key empirical predictor of many aspects of parenting practice on average at societal level. This can also be true for same-sex parenting couples, who may also adopt the gender binary (masculine/feminine) within their parenting practices, remaining constrained by prevailing gender norms (Herbrand, 2018). Some of this is linked to body practices, such as pregnancy and breastfeeding, which have long shaped our normative frameworks and accompanying policies, but other aspects are concerned with the social constructs of 'care' and 'breadwinning'. One interesting area of work is the bio-social which documents the physiological changes that occur also in male bodies when they are engaged with infant care and thus potentially challenges some essentialist narratives (Rilling & Mascaro, 2017).

Research into fatherhood is a multidisciplinary endeavour spanning disciplines such as Demography, Labour Economics, Management Science, Medicine, Nursing Studies, Political Science, Psychology, Social Policy, Social Work and Sociology. It is not possible in a brief review article to cover the full range of scholarship, even in the more narrowly defined policy-related fatherhood research. As such, the article focuses on four areas in policy-related fatherhood research which have received much recent attention, but which are not often brought together within a single article. An aim of this selection is thus to encourage and highlight the potential value of integrated work within fatherhood research across the various disciplinary boundaries.

First, the article considers how researchers have explored the determinants and outcomes of recent changes in government policies to support men as carers, in particularly parenting leaves. This has been a dynamic area of policy in many higher income countries, and particularly in Europe. Second, the article considers the range of research into organisation and workplace policies which relate to fathers. Particularly in countries with more limited government policy, employers often play a key – and sometimes supranational role – in the shifting of gendered norms around parenting practices. Third, as gendered norms around parenting are shifting, so are investigations into the associations between fatherhood, male health, and family well-being. This relatively new field of research considers those policies which relate to health and fatherhood, including the health of the fathers, but also of their partners and children. Fourth, the article considers the recent but burgeoning literature into the ways in which various government and

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<sup>1</sup> Saxonberg (2013: 33) proposes that "we use the term 'genderizing' to describe *policies that promote different gender roles for men and women*. 'Degenderizing' policies then would *denote policies that promote the elimination of gender roles*".

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employer policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic have impacted upon fatherhood. The article concludes with a discussion of key gaps in policy-related fatherhood research in these four areas, which might be usefully addressed by future research.

## 2. Fathers and parenting leaves: government policy supporting men as carers

The last decade has seen a lot of policy development by many national governments which has had the explicit aim of supporting men to care for their children (see Koslowski et al., 2021). There has been a commensurate increase in research, particularly around fathers and parenting leaves (Deven & Moss, 2022). Parenting leaves can provide fathers with the option to care for their infants and children for a period of time, whilst ensuring their employment is protected and that they have a job to return to. The umbrella term parenting leaves covers a range of specific policies such as birth leave, family leave, maternity leave, parental leave and paternity leave. Sometimes countries use the same labels in different ways. For example, in some countries, such as Spain and Iceland, birth leaves are used to denote leave for all parents (i.e. mothers and fathers). In other contexts, a birth leave may be a specific health and safety policy for mothers. As such, it is helpful to have an ‘umbrella term’ for the policy area and then the country specific technical policy labels can be used precisely as required. There is much to study, as the last decade has seen fundamental shifts to policy design, at least in certain countries, such as Germany and Spain. The recently approved Directive of the European Union on balancing working and private life (EU 2019/1158) mandates a baseline of non-transferable paid leave for fathers for all member states by 2022, though the specifics of the policy design are allowed to vary above this baseline across member states.

Leave policy is a fascinating area of social policy, as it has shown itself to be particularly effective in moving us towards gender equality in some contexts (Almqvist & Duvander, 2014; Andersen, 2018; Bünning, 2015). It is also an area that shows how important it is to pay attention to the details of policy design as sometimes well intentioned, but badly designed policy can have negative outcomes, in terms of gender equality as much as well designed policy can have positive outcomes (Brighouse & Wright, 2008; Duvander et al., 2019). The main types of parenting leave available to fathers are the usually shorter paternity leave, which is typically a few days or weeks, to be taken shortly after the birth of a child and the generally longer parental leave, which is defined as leave equally available to both parents.

The dynamics of gender, employment and parenthood have shifted so that parenthood no longer automatically equates to female withdrawal from the labour market and sole reliance on a male breadwinner (Crompton, 1999; Marynissen, 2022). However, the complementary idea of the (incomplete) gender revolution (Goldscheider et al., 2015, Sayer, 2016) that fathers should participate in childcare, has not seen the same amount of change as mothers’ participation in the labour market. This imbalance is often reflected in policy design. These design features of leave policies are often the focus of research. Intended policy outcomes for leave policies vary, but certainly some policy actors have seen them as an instrument for increasing the possibilities for fathers to spend time caring for infants (Caracciolo di Torella, 2014; Koslowski & O’Brien, 2022; O’Brien, 2009), with knock on effects for female labour market participation which in turn may positively impact household financial well-being (Andersen, 2018).

Parenting leave may have multiple aims beyond supporting fathers with caring. These may include a concern for maternal health, infant well-being, fertility, labour market policy as well as gender equality (Moss et al., 2019). We know that where fathers take parental leave, there are many positive effects such as for their female partners’ employment, the relationship between parents and time spent over the lifecourse on childcare and domestic work (for a summary see Koslowski & O’Brien, 2022). There is a literature which considers the benefits to children from increased father involvement (see Yogman & Eppel, 2022). This underpins the case for much of the government intervention into providing leave policies also for fathers.

The Nordic countries are well documented as being early adopters of parenting leaves for men (e.g. Brandth & Kvande, 2020; Eydal & Rostgaard, 2016). The Nordic countries are also unusually well equipped with extensive data on leave taking. As such, much of the research on fathers and leave policies comes from this region. A key learning has been that policy design really matters for whether men will use the leave to which they are entitled. The clear research finding is that fathers will take leave that is available to them only, often referred to as ‘a daddy quota’ or ‘reserved months’ (Duvander & Johansson, 2012; Patnaik, 2019). However, as the cases of Japan and Korea show us, independent entitlement may be a necessary condition

for male leave taking, but it is not a sufficient one, cultural endorsement is also necessary (Nakazato, 2019). In addition, payment is important (e.g. Bartel et al., 2018), but also payment amount.

Other parts of Europe have seen radical reform to their leave systems in recent years and are now catching up with their Nordic neighbours. Germany and Spain now have near equal and de-gendered leave entitlements for mothers and fathers. In Spain, leave has become mandatory for all eligible parents (Meil et al., 2021) and Germany has included an incentive for fathers to take leave (Bünning, 2019). In a review of nearly 50 high and middle-income countries, only seven countries offered more than two months paid leave to fathers in 2020 as an individual entitlement – so in other words, the vast majority of countries have gender inequality built in (Koslowski, 2021). However, in the relatively small number of countries where leave is similarly available to both mothers and fathers, there has been a steady increase in fathers using the leave, although mothers continue to use more leave than fathers in all countries. One question often interrogated by scholars is why fathers do not use more leave than they do (Karu & Tremblay, 2018; Reimer, 2019).

A recent turn in parenting leave research, including that on fathers, is a focus on eligibility (Dobrotić & Blum, 2020; Doucet & McKay, 2020). It had been common in leave research to focus on cross-national comparison of the scope of benefits, but less attention had been given to the proportion of parents who would be eligible to the leave. As much leave entitlement is tied to employment-based criteria, in so far as employment precarity has increased, so fewer parents might find themselves fulfilling eligibility criteria. It is often the case that parental leave is found to be used differently across socio-economic groups (e.g. Koslowski & Kadar-Satat, 2019). Recent studies have shown that significant proportions of fathers may not be eligible to the leave provision (EIGE, 2020).

In the case that fathers are spending a month or more on leave, there is evidence to suggest that this has positive benefits for father-child relationships. It has shown to be important for fathers to be taking some of the parental leave alone in terms of its potential transformative effect on co-parenting and gender equality (O'Brien & Wall, 2017). There is perhaps a slow shift towards discourse that suggests that 'involved' parenting is neither sex-specific nor gender related. This is reflected in new policy formations as mentioned above.

In summary, there is much to study as parenting leave policy is a dynamic public policy area. A common research question found in the literature is why fathers are not taking leave. Scholarly responses range from critiques of eligibility to other aspects of policy design. Most important for fathers is an individual entitlement to well-paid leave. We now turn to the site of implementation of these policies, to the workplace.

### 3. Fathers in the workplace

Governments set a baseline for leave policies and flexible working options, but their implementation generally happens in the context of an employment relationship. The practice of taking leave and other flexible working is determined at organisation level. In addition, many employers offer policies and benefits to their employees that are above and beyond the minimum required by their jurisdiction (Kaufman, 2020; Moran & Koslowski, 2019). Many global companies consider how they might implement global parenting leave policies (Harrington et al., 2014; 2019). As such, employers are also (in addition to governments) in the position to reinforce or challenge different 'gender orders' in relation to divisions of labour within parenting.

As with scholarship on government policies, one of the main questions asked by scholars is why fathers are not making full use of their entitlements. One curious element is how new – but still gendered norms – in leave taking and other flexible working practices develop (Moran & Koslowski, 2019). In theory, employers increasingly offer the same entitlements to both mothers and fathers, but their availability in practice is perceived as gendered, with men taking less leave than mothers. For example, almost one-third of fathers believed that flexible working arrangements were unavailable to them in the UK context, compared to one-tenth of mothers (Cook et al., 2021).

The past decade has been a time of much change for workplace assumptions around the caregiving roles that fathers play and whether work-family benefits might also extend to them (Harrington, 2022). One aspect that comes to light in much data, is the lack of fathers' voices and there is a current in the literature that seeks to address this (see Harrington, 2022; Levy & Kotelchuck, 2022). Scholars explore how there

remains a strong association between fathering identity and paid work, which means that many fathers continue to wish to signal full commitment to the workplace, rather than use family policies that may be available to them (Borgkvist, 2022). That is to say, that some fathers consider that using family policies might be a risk to their employment (Tanquerel, 2022). It is well established that women pay a price for becoming mothers and there is some evidence to suggest that the penalty for involved fathers may be even steeper (Harrington, 2022; Williams et al., 2016).

The fatherhood premium in contrast to the motherhood pay penalty is well documented and enduring across national contexts (e.g., England et al., 2016; Glauber, 2018; Musick et al., 2020). That is to say that becoming a parent is associated with a pay premium for fathers, but the opposite is true for mothers. In recent years, research has considered whether the premium is evenly distributed across the earnings distribution and it would appear that for high-earning fathers, the associated premium has been increasing, at least in the US (Glauber, 2018). Other approaches consider a couple-level framework, which provides insights into within-family gender dynamics after the birth of a child (Musick et al., 2020). Certainly, there are gendered dynamics and processes at play during this transition to parenthood that are likely to create gender specific impetus for fathers' parenting practices and how they integrate them with their workplace practices.

Workplace characteristics have been shown to play a very important role in father's parenting practices (Gregory and Milner, 2011; Hobson and Fahlén, 2009). Research points consistently to the key role that line managers play in making leave policies accessible to fathers in practice (Harrington et al., 2019; Bosch & Las Heras, 2022). Other research focuses on the role of the size of the organisation, how senior leaders model – or not - combining parenting and work, HR practices such as maternity and paternity replacement cover, and the design of the occupational family benefits. Practical steps such as having a fathers' employee network have been shown to be beneficial in contributing to a change in workplace culture (Harrington et al., 2019).

There is a debate around whether flexibility is helpful or not in encouraging fathers to use leave. In some situations, leave must be taken in one block of time, during which the employee is not working at all. In other situations, it might be possible to take for example one day leave per week – or to take a week or two of leave at a time. Some argue that this can backfire somewhat as a strategy and increase levels of stress and reduce well-being (Brandth & Kvande, 2019; Harvey & Tremblay, 2019).

Other scholars consider the persistently gendered nature of part time working. Fathers rarely work part time, whereas it is relatively common in many European countries for mothers (Eurostat, 2018). Even when both parents are working full time, fathers work longer hours on average (Craig & Mullan, 2011). Where fathers do work part-time, it does relate to levels of involvement in childcare (Bünning, 2020). Well-paid non-transferable parental leave for fathers, short parental leave for mothers and generous family allowances have been found to be associated with reduced working hours for fathers (Bünning & Pollmann-Schult, 2015).

Management literature is increasingly considering the impact of fatherhood in the workplace and finding that it can be associated with increased job satisfaction and greater work-family enrichment (Ladge et al., 2015). Some researchers argue that fatherhood can contribute to psychological development and maturity, which in turn carry over to men's capacities to be excellent employees (Ladge & Humberd, 2022). There is also literature that looks to develop the business case for supporting employees who happen to be fathers. Recognising that employees have to combine their employment roles with also being parents is more developed for mothers than for fathers, but in both cases can be part of a talent management strategy and used to address aspects of employee engagement (Harrington et al., 2014).

Questions certainly remain around how organisations can use policies to encourage the view of men as both parents and professionals (Ladge & Humberd, 2022). Men have fewer role models to look to for support and guidance on balancing work and family (Ladge & Greenberg, 2019). There is an interaction between changes in families and changes in the workplace and this dance will continue. Cultural factors at both a state and work-place level are also key determinants in how fathers navigate work and family.

In summary, management scholarship increasingly reflects how companies often go beyond that which is required of them by public policy. Fathers are increasingly able to access more generous leave benefits and access flexible working than they were even five years ago. One of the enduring questions is why fathers still often appear reluctant to make use of such benefits. There is still a relative dearth of fathers' voices in the data used by researchers, but steps are being taken to bring redress to this situation.

#### 4. Fatherhood practices, health and well-being

Much as Criado-Perez (2019) has highlighted the data bias against women in many situations, it can be said that when it comes to the connections between male health and fatherhood, the bias is perhaps reversed. It is only very recently that research has begun to consider how fatherhood impacts on men's own physical and mental health and development (Kotelchuck, 2022b). There is also growing evidence of men's biologic adaptation to fatherhood (e.g. Grebe et al., 2019; Rilling & Mascaro, 2017). In short, "father's physical health is much more profoundly affected by the onset of early fatherhood than perhaps most of the existing popular and professional literature here-to-fore would have assumed" Kotelchuck, 2022b: 69.

One current of research documents that father involvement in the pregnancy and birthing period is associated with many positive outcomes (Kotelchuck 2022a; 2022b). Indeed, a body of research finds a correlation between father involvement during pregnancy and a range of positive outcomes such as mothers receiving prenatal care, smoking reduction in pregnancy, reduced infant morbidities and continued paternal involvement (see Yogman & Eppel, 2022). Increasingly, fathers are finding themselves invited and able to attend antenatal clinics. There are at least two aspects to this, one is whether they are welcomed by medical providers and the second is whether employers will respect this as a necessary medical appointment.

There have been radical shifts in norms and policies around fathers attending births. Most fathers are now present at the birth of their children (e.g. Redshaw & Henderson, 2013). Again, there are multiple aspects to this, whether they are welcomed at the hospital by the midwives (not always e.g. Burgess & Goldman, 2019) – and then whether it is something the parents want to do. There is also a body of research which considers the benefits to fathers' involvement with newborn children, such as father skin-to-skin care immediately after birth (Erlandsson et al., 2007).

The importance of father involvement in the prenatal and birthing period has been recognised in international health policy. An example of this is the WHO recommendations on health promotion interventions for maternal and newborn health, in particular recommendation two on male involvement interventions:

*"Interventions to promote the involvement of men during pregnancy, childbirth and after birth are recommended to facilitate and support improved self-care of women, improved home care practices for women and newborns, improved use of skilled care during pregnancy, childbirth and the postnatal period for women and newborns, and to increase the timely use of facility care for obstetric and newborn complications." (World Health Organisation, 2015) (p.3)*

Another area where there is a relative absence of policy is around father well-being in the period soon after birth (FNS, 2019). Post natal or post-partum depression has long been understood as affecting women, but until very recently was not recognised as something that fathers could also experience. Paternal postpartum depression (PPPD) is now recognised to affect a considerable number of fathers, and that in turn, this can affect the health of their children. In short, new fatherhood increases the likeliness of depression in men (see Eppel & Yogman, 2022). Governments have been slow to respond (FNS, 2019).

There is a link between fathers and successful breastfeeding (Garfield, 2018). This link is largely neglected by policy makers and health providers (Sherriff & Hall, 2014). Whilst some health providers provide support, this link is addressed mostly by third sector organisations such as the Fatherhood Institute, which produces a 'Dads and Breastfeeding' leaflet.<sup>2</sup>

Whilst much fatherhood research focuses on CIS-gender<sup>3</sup> different sex couples, there is also a large body of literature on same sex father couples, some of which focuses on health (e.g. Murphy, 2013; Newman et al., 2018). One area of recent research considers gay and HIV-positive parenthood. It is now established that people living with HIV who have an undetectable viral load and are on a treatment regime cannot transmit the virus to their children. However, this is information that clinicians did not always provide unless prompted to patients and so there is still much misunderstanding about reproductive possibilities in this community (Pralat et al., 2021).

Much as fathers in the workplace who partake in 'deviant' or 'pioneering' behaviours when they use their entitlements feel vulnerable to discrimination, facing prejudice is something frequently reported in

2 Fatherhood Institute – Dads and Breastfeeding Leaflet. Available at: [www.fatherhoodinstitute.org](http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org). Accessed February 28 2022.

3 Denoting or relating to a person whose sense of personal identity and gender corresponds with their birth sex.

the narratives of stay-at-home fathers (Jones, 2020). However, they also reported high levels of mental well-being (Jones, 2020). This ‘minority stress’ of behaving in a way contrary to gender norms could be an area to explore further.

Once again, there is a tension between the importance of calling out the distinct experience of fathers, for example, even the basic act of data collection and inclusion of fathers’ voice – and to what extent the solution is to move towards a ‘degendered’ situation, especially as some argue we should be moving away from gender binaries. Some literature emphasises that fathers bring distinct aspects to the care they provide to infants such as increased amounts of play (see Yogman & Eppel, 2022): That fathers offer a distinct and complementary contribution to that of mothers. Other literature aims to move towards an understanding of fluidity of the connections between gender, sex and care.

In summary, fatherhood has been found to profoundly impact men’s health and development. These in turn, impact infant, partner and family health (Kotelchuck, 2022a, b). Fatherhood is a risk or resiliency factor for health across the lifecourse. However, public health policies are somewhat slow to progress and there is more work to be done. Policy development in health aimed at fathers is behind public policy and employer policy.

## 5. COVID 19 policy response and fathers

The COVID 19 pandemic in 2020, 2021 and 2022 gave rise to unprecedented policy response on the part of public health authorities, governments and employers. Stay at home orders were commonplace which included early childhood education and care settings, school and workplace closures (Blum & Dobrotić, 2022). With these closures came simultaneous home schooling and home working for some parents. Parents and other carers who relied on formal care and schools were profoundly impacted by the pandemic and the demands on them to provide care increased greatly. In addition, parents were suddenly unable to rely on other informal sources of support such as grandparents and friends due to social distancing measures.

Many countries introduced a range of extraordinary and temporary measures, some of which were directly targeted at parents, such as specific care leaves or financial support (Kosłowski et al., 2022; Richardson et al., 2020). A very common response was to encourage workers to work from home where possible rather than to take emergency leave; that is a flexible approach to working was a policy response.

Social scientists have been quick to rise to the challenge of documenting the impact of such radical change and disruption to our daily lives. COVID-19 and the associated lockdowns and school and ECEC closures created new dynamics of care within households, which scholars have been keen to capture. The gender division of labour and childcare was affected in various ways. Scholars and policy makers are exploring whether the pandemic life of working and care from home will bring about lasting changes and whether work-care conflicts have increased or decreased (Blaskó et al., 2020).

Many studies are interested in how this situation affected the division of childcare between mothers and fathers (research seems to have been mostly on heterosexual two-parent families so far). A general consensus across many countries is that additional childcare responsibilities fell disproportionately on mothers, who increased their already higher amounts of childcare, but that fathers also increased time spent on childcare compared to before the pandemic (Craig & Churchill, 2021; Hank & Steinbach, 2021; Kreyenfeld & Zinn, 2021; Mangiavacchi et al., 2021; Margaria, 2021; Shafer et al., 2020). Some researchers have found that fathers took on new roles as parents tried to figure out ways of working and home schooling (Berghammer, 2021; Petts et al., 2021). The next question will be to consider the longer-term consolidation of these new roles. Other scholars looked at working hours and found that mothers adapted working hours more than fathers (e.g. Collins et al., 2021; Hipp & Brüning, 2021; Yerkes et al., 2020). Many studies have concluded that despite changes to childcare time, the pandemic has rather reinforced the gendered division of work and sent us backwards in this regard (Berghammer, 2021; Blum & Dobrotić, 2022; Cheng et al., 2021; Farré et al., 2020).

Some studies used this change to explore whether father’s involvement was also correlated with children’s emotional well-being (they found it was) (Mangiavacchi et al., 2021) and there was also work which suggests stronger father-child connections as a result of the lockdowns (Bisby, 2020). Researchers were interested in satisfaction with work-family balance as well as partner’s share. Other studies have looked into the association between mental well-being and financial insecurity due to the pandemic. Cheng



et al., 2021 finds that for the UK, working parents, especially mothers, experienced worse mental and financial position, which was even more difficult for poorer households.

One aspect of lockdowns is that for a certain cohort of parents of newborns, fathers were able to stay home which they would usually not have been to do (Sponton, 2022). Not so positive, was the situation where fathers were excluded from antenatal provision and from births (Menzel, 2021). Again, this could be seen as going back towards more traditional roles. LGBTQ+ parents and partners were similarly unable to attend appointments and births (Greenfield et al., 2021).

In many countries, it will be interesting to see how hybrid working continues or not for those able to do so, and the association this has with the gender division of childcare between parents. A striking characteristic of many of the policies which came in response to the pandemic were that they were not subject to usual equality impact evaluation processes. As such, it is perhaps not surprising that much of the COVID-19 policy response is associated with retrograde consequences for fatherhood, though with some silver linings in terms of increases in childcare time for fathers, on average.

## 6. Conclusions: Where next for policy-related fatherhood research

This article has sought to review recent policy-related fatherhood research across four key areas. While it makes no claims to be exhaustive, it aims to provide a sense of the breadth of fatherhood research across disciplines, as well as reminding us of the case for working across disciplinary boundaries on common questions.

Whilst the focus has been on different areas of policy, there have been some commonalities across these areas. Both scholars of public policy and workplaces and employer policy are concerned with a lack of take up by fathers of benefits. There is a general lack of fathers' voice in the data, which limits the research questions that can be addressed.

There have also been commonalities in the nature of the research gaps. There is a tendency to talk about fathers as if they were an homogenous group, when it is likely that fatherhood is experienced differently by socio-economic groupings. Some groups are routinely excluded from research (Yogman & Eppel, 2022). One group about whom we know relatively little are transnational families and fathers who have migrated (Mussino et al 2018; Tervola et al., 2017 are rare examples). We know much less about lower income groups. As Diniz et al., 2021 note in their systematic review of the literature, father involvement beyond predominantly white and middle-class families remains relatively under-explored by researchers.

More highly educated, higher earning, employed and married fathers are more likely to have access to leave options and related benefits. Conversely, minority ethnic, unmarried and lower-earning fathers are often disadvantaged due to less secure employment conditions and access to fewer related family benefits. It is easier to study those with access to benefits rather than to study a lack of entitlement but studying the lack of entitlement is nonetheless very important for us to have a complete picture. Similarly, it should be noted that there is more to study in some countries than others: there is not an even geographic distribution of studies. There has been much more research conducted in the Nordic countries (e.g. Duvander et al., 2019; Eydal & Rostgaard, 2016) and this is reflected in the literature.

There is much to be gained from working across disciplines, as exemplified by the volume edited by Grau Grau et al. 2022. Fatherhood research is often motivated by an interest in and also sometimes a desire for a fundamental social change in parenting practices at the macro societal level. This can only be achieved if government policy makers, health service providers and employers – and the academic research base which informs them – are working together.

There are other areas which this article could have focused on. Some scholarship has a tendency to focus on fathers as a group that are in some way problematised – and 'fixing' their fatherhood is seen as an intrinsic part of a possible solution. More could have been made in the article not only of fatherhood but of men as carers more generally. There remains a general under representation of men as carers, both formally and informally, and across the lifecourse. There are few male ECEC workers (OECD 2018; Brody et al., 2021) and few male carers working in social care (OECD, 2020).

Scholars are noting a 'stalled gender revolution' but that is not to say that there has not been generational shift in fathering practice (Adler & Lenz, 2016; Dermott & Miller, 2015). Fathers are more involved in infant care, but their employers are not keeping pace with the change and so fathers are experiencing work-family conflicts, albeit still in a different way to mothers (Kaufman, 2013). There has

been change, certainly changing intimacies and emotional discourse. Whether there has been a fundamental shift in gender regimes, perhaps not so much. So, the extent of change is not an absolute shift to parenting without different gender roles for men and women, even though much of the culture is shifting. Those individuals who have radically shifted roles still largely fall outside social frameworks.

There is consensus in the literature around what works for engaging fathers across policy contexts. Fathers need to be explicitly included in policy frameworks. In some cases, the best way to do this may be to have degendered policies, to which all are entitled as individuals. However, it is still likely to be necessary 'to label' even degendered policies as being explicitly for fathers (as well as for mothers). There is perhaps a paradox that degendered policies are usually most effective, but that fathers need to recognise that these degendered policies are for them. To return to a father pushing his baby along in a pram in a park on a week day, the policy landscape across these four areas of parenting leaves, workplace policies, health and public health response holds much potential to help us to realise such an image. However, if we see fathers in the park, it remains the case for now that it is most likely the weekend.

## Acknowledgments

The author thanks the founders of the International Father Research Network and all those involved in the Landshut Conference, 2020. Her thinking for the article was also much shaped by a multi-disciplinary and international Experts Meeting on Fatherhood Engagement hosted in 2018 by the Harvard Kennedy School's Women and Public Policy Program, funded by the Social Trends Institute, and organised in collaboration with the International Center for Work and Family at the IESE Business School.

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# Information in German

## Deutscher Titel

Übersichtsartikel: Elternzeit, Arbeitsplatzmerkmale, männliche Gesundheit und die Pandemie: Strömungen in der sozialpolitischen Vaterschaftsforschung in Ländern mit höherem Einkommen

## Zusammenfassung

**Fragestellung:** Dieser Übersichtsartikel gibt einen Überblick über den Stand der sozialpolitischen Vaterschaftsforschung in Ländern mit hohem Einkommen.

**Hintergrund:** Der Übersichtsartikel konzentriert sich auf vier Hauptströmungen der multidisziplinären politikbezogenen Vaterschaftsforschung. Die erste befasst sich mit der Forschung zu Elternzeit auf nationaler Ebene. Die zweite befasst sich mit der Erforschung von Organisations- und Arbeitsplatzrichtlinien. Die dritte präsentiert Forschungsergebnisse zu Maßnahmen rund um männliche Gesundheit und Vaterschaftspraktiken. Der vierte befasst sich mit den Auswirkungen von Maßnahmen im Zusammenhang mit COVID-19 auf Väter.

**Methode:** Es handelt sich um einen Übersichtsartikel und somit um einen Literaturüberblick. Es ist keine systematische Literaturrecherche, sondern zielt vielmehr darauf ab, den Nutzen multidisziplinärer Gespräche in der Vaterschaftsforschung aufzuzeigen.

**Ergebnisse:** Über die vier Politikbereiche hinweg gibt es Gemeinsamkeiten in Bezug auf Schlüsselfragen, aber auch in Bezug auf Forschungslücken.

**Schlussfolgerung:** Es besteht Konsens darüber, was für die Einbindung von Vätern in allen politischen Kontexten hilfreich ist. Es liegt vielleicht ein Paradoxon darin, dass geschlechtsneutrale Richtlinien generell am effektivsten sind, aber dass Väter zugleich erkennen müssen, dass diese Richtlinien sie miteinschließen.

**Schlagwörter:** Vaterschaft, Väter, Kinderbetreuung, Elternzeit, flexibles Arbeiten, väterliche Gesundheit, COVID-19



JFR – Journal of Family Research, 2023, vol. 35, pp. 1–16.

doi: <https://doi.org/10.20377/jfr-820>

Submitted: March 1, 2022

Accepted: July 13, 2022

Published online: August 3, 2022

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