

The Gendered Transition to Parenthood: Lasting Inequalities in the Home and in the Labor Market

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Abstract

We discuss the slow process through which the gendered transition to parenthood has changed in Western societies and the degrees to which this process challenges economic theories on the utility-maximizing rational man, woman, and/or couple. The transition to parenthood has long-term consequences for women's careers, often even in couples in which the woman earns more than the man. The reason for the slow-changing process can partially be found in gender norms and the physical aspects of the transition to motherhood, including breastfeeding and norms regarding how long the child benefits from being in the mother's care. One of the challenges faced by research on the gendered transition to parenthood is how to distinguish where the boundaries between biology and gender norms lie. We discuss the gendered transition to parenthood and its career-related consequences, and we elaborate on potential ways in which research may advance to dismantle the interconnected nature of biology, gender, and economic reasoning in couples' transition to parenthood.

INTRODUCTION

Although gender equality in paid and unpaid work has increased in Western societies, the trend has slowed in the most recent decade(s). Men's unpaid work has not increased to the extent that could be expected, and the gender wage gap has been resistant to change after the stabilization of women's labor force participation (Arulampalam, Booth, & Bryan, 2007; Blau & Kahn, 2007). A critical juncture for the reproduction and augmentation of gender inequalities in the labor market and the family is the transition to parenthood. Although women's and men's careers follow a fairly similar development until couples have children, the career trajectories tend to diverge after the transition to parenthood. Researchers have argued that the gendered division of paid and unpaid work that is established when couples become parents

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is the single most important reason for lasting gender inequalities in the labor market. The remaining gender wage gap, which seems impossible to eliminate, despite women's increasing educational credentials, professional experience, and work hours (Arulampalam *et al.*, 2007), has been proposed as support for this assumption. Furthermore, a growing body of research is finding associations between fathers' engagement in the care of their small children and the father-child relationship later in the children's lives. The more involved fathers have been in childcare, as indicated by parental leave uptake, the more satisfied they seem to be with the relationship with the child (Haas & Hwang, 2008), and the more frequent the contact they have with their children after a divorce or separation (Duvander & Jans, 2009; Westphal, Poortman, & van der Lippe, 2014). Fathers who have taken longer parental leaves also subsequently perform more care work and housework (Almqvist & Duvander, 2014; Nepomnyaschy & Waldfogel, 2007). In this context, an intriguing question is why the gendered division of care work and labor market work remains, despite its consequences for women's careers and its presumed links with men's relationships with their children.

In an international context, the degree to which mothers return to the job that they had before the birth of the child or quit work entirely varies with social policies and gender culture, among other things (cf. Steiber & Haas, 2012; Uunk, 2015). Not least important are the family leave policies that are in place in the countries in focus and the length of any maternity, paternity, and parental leave made available to parents. In countries where job-protected leaves are moderate to long and include some financial compensation, women find it easier to return to the job that they had before the birth of the child (compared to countries in which such leaves are very short and/or unpaid) (cf. Pettit & Hook, 2005). The availability of childcare is also of vital importance. When spots in day care centers are scarce and/or their costs are high, women in low-paid jobs may have little reason to go back to paid work, to the detriment of their economic independence and causing considerable financial vulnerability in the event of divorce. Higher educated women return to paid work faster after a parental leave than lower educated women but may have difficulties pursuing their career if they are the parents taking the main responsibility for childcare (for instance, by working part-time) (e.g., Aisenbrey, Evertsson, & Grunow, 2009).

Undoubtedly, there is variation in the extent to which women choose to and want to stay home to care for a child. In research on the gendered transition to parenthood, it is important to separate any preferences to stay home with a child and scale down the career from the structures that force some women to do so against their will. Although it is often very difficult, it is important to separate women's choices and more or less voluntary behavior from potential employers' discrimination toward women and/or mothers.

This issue brings us to the very forefront of the research field, highlighting some of the challenges with which contemporary scholars struggle and the more intriguing solutions that may lie ahead.

We focus on the transition to parenthood and discuss why this issue remains a gendered experience in all Western societies, including the Nordic countries, which are considered to be among the most gender-equal in the world. Our focus is on general trends at the national and international levels. The transition to parenthood may have implications other than those suggested here for women and men in non-Western societies and in specific groups within Western countries. For example, earlier longitudinal research indicates variation in the extent to which (changes in) the number of children and the time spent on housework influence wages among ethnic majority groups versus minority groups [for a comparison among white, black, and Hispanic women in the United States, see Parrott (2014)]. Although such variation and its implications are certainly important, we use the limited space that we have at our disposal to focus on the major trends. In other words, the findings that we describe and discuss are of most relevance for the majority groups in their respective societies, and although the perspective of intersectionality is important, we refrain from developing it here.

Dividing the essay into three parts, we first discuss theories and research on women's and men's career breaks and care leaves connected to childbirth and, second, discuss how these career breaks influence women's careers, income, and wages. We end by providing some suggestions for how the research field may develop and explore potential new grounds in the future.

A CHILD IS BORN—WHO CARES?

The delivery and labor connected to giving birth are supervised by professionals in public hospitals but are considered to be one of the most private moments that a couple can share. As the family returns home, friends and family line up to congratulate them and celebrate the newborn. The transition to parenthood is framed by the institutional context, norms, and expectations. According to the current discourses on parenthood, the fact that the (biological) mother is the parent who has carried the child during pregnancy and—in most cases—breastfeeds it during its first few months creates a special bond between the mother and child, a bond that is considered to come naturally, almost automatically (Evertsson & Grunow, 2016; Miller, 2007). In contrast, according to this view, the father-child bond needs to be actively built and constructed. To some extent, it also seems to be the mother's duty to ensure that this bond is created and facilitated (Alsarve, Boye, & Roman, 2016). Given that the mother is the first (and, often, main) carer of the child, she may appear as an expert, which could scare off the

father. We find examples of these different perceptions of the respective bonds between the child and its mother and father in interviews with European parents-to-be (Grunow & Evertsson, 2016). Parents frequently have varying ideas on what is needed for the father–child bond to be created and maintained. In some contexts, the father spending some time with the child together with the mother in evenings after work is considered sufficient, whereas in others, the father spending considerable time on his own with the child is deemed important. Apart from potential financial concerns, which are further discussed below, individual and societal norms with regard to the “good” mother/father and ideals with regard to the child’s best interests structure the division of care work and the degree to which the mother and father will spend time away from paid work to care for the small child.

SPECIALIZATION, RELATIVE RESOURCES/BARGAINING AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER

One important reason why couples may divide the care work and paid work unequally is that doing so is frequently financially rational for the family. On average, men earn more than women do, and fathers’ labor market prospects may be better than women’s are. According to Becker (1981), couples benefit when one of the spouses specializes in paid work and the other specializes in care work and housework. Given that people become better at doing things they do often, it would be financially rational for the family as a whole if, for instance, the man was allowed to specialize in paid work if he were the parent earning the most in the family. This perspective seems reasonable to the extent that it may be financially beneficial for the couple to let the person who earns the least take the longest parental leave and/or work part-time, if needed, when the children are small. Nevertheless, in the long run, it is seldom the case that full-blown specialization by one of the spouses in unpaid work and care would benefit the family or the person specializing in this work. When childcare is cheap and the mother’s wage is comparable to the father’s, the family benefits the most financially if both spouses work in paid labor once any maternity/parental leave is exhausted.

Another perspective, related to the former but acknowledging the power differences arising in couples in which one spouse earns more than the other, is the relative resource or bargaining perspective (Blood & Wolfe, 1960; Lundberg & Pollak, 1996). According to this perspective, the resources in terms of income and status that each person possesses govern the division of paid and unpaid work in the family. The person with the greater resources has a benefit in negotiations in the family, with the results that he/she negotiates a smaller share of the unpaid work compared to the partner who earns less.

The relative resource/bargaining perspective has been tested in studies on coupled women's and men's time spent on housework. Nevertheless, it is less clear whether we can assume that time spent with children is also influenced by relative resources. It seems reasonable to expect that, to some extent, all parents would like to spend time with their children. However, parents also value their paid work and the total family income. Hence, it would continue to be financially rational for the couple to allow the person earning the most to spend the least amount of time in housework and care work. According to this perspective, we would not expect pure specialization but rather greater or smaller shares of care and unpaid work, depending on the relative resources of the individuals in question.

A third perspective suggests that neither specialization theory nor the relative resource/bargaining perspective can explain the division of paid and unpaid work. Instead, the performance of care work and housework signals gender and can be used as a way of socially constructing or *doing gender* (Fenstermaker Berk, 1985; West & Zimmerman, 1987). According to this perspective, with the goal of being accepted by the social environment, people continuously recreate gender in all of their social interactions. Performing care work and housework is one way to do the female gender, whereas the male gender may be done by performing other types of work (and even by avoiding performing care work and housework). For example, a woman and a man in a relationship may divide care work and housework traditionally to send socially agreed-upon signals about their gender both to each other and to the people around them.

Much as gender is done in social interaction, so are motherhood and fatherhood. To a far greater extent than fathers, mothers continue to be expected to be guided primarily by the ethics of the child's best interests, even when they work as many hours in paid work as men do (Hays, 1996; Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards, & Gillies, 2000). Motherhood comes with an expectation of self-sacrifice that tends to be associated with feelings of guilt. To be a "good" mother and, ultimately, a "real" woman, a mother is expected to structure her life around her children and to relinquish any activities that may benefit her, such as paid work and leisure, if they are not beneficial to her children (Elvin-Nowak & Thomsson, 2001; Miller, 2007). By contrast, fathers can draw on several discourses that provide alternative positions in relation to fatherhood (Miller, 2012). Drawing on the traditional provider role, fathers want or feel a need to spend sufficient time and energy on paid work to economically provide for the family. Although doing so may mean a great amount of time and energy for some fathers, self-sacrifice in itself, that is, relinquishing activities and interests that are not associated with the child's well-being, is not traditionally demanded of a "good" father. Fathers may

also draw on a “new fatherhood” discourse that brings with it the expectations that fathers will be more actively involved in childcare, although not always to the same degree or in the same ways as mothers [Björk (2013) on Sweden, Magaraggia (2012) on Italy, Miller (2012) on the United Kingdom, and Grunow & Evertsson (2016) on several European countries]. Hence, to a large extent, fatherhood and motherhood remain different social constructs that frame not only the expectations from their social environment that mothers and fathers meet but also the expectations that they have of themselves as parents. These expectations and gender norms have a bearing on women’s return to paid work after a family leave (when to return and for how many hours) and structure women’s and men’s short- and long-term career prospects.

CAREER-RELATED CONSEQUENCES OF PARENTAL (OR FAMILY) LEAVE TAKING¹

There is ample evidence in Western societies for motherhood penalties and fatherhood premiums in terms of wage and career (Bygren & Gähler, 2012; Cooke, 2014; Gangl & Ziefle, 2009; Hodges & Budig, 2010; Sigle-Rushton & Waldfogel, 2007). Mothers tend to earn lower wages and have smaller career opportunities, such as less access to supervisory positions, than do women without children. Correspondingly, the fatherhood premium implies higher wages and better career prospects among fathers than among other men. The presence and strength of these penalties and premiums vary between countries. In the Nordic countries, studies tends to find fatherhood premiums but no or only small motherhood penalties (Bygren & Gähler, 2012; Petersen, Penner, & Høgsnes, 2014). Some Swedish studies even find higher wages among mothers than among nonmothers (Boschini, Håkanson, Rosén, & Sjögren, 2011; Magnusson & Neramo, 2014). Selectivity into paid work and into motherhood is low in Sweden (where fertility rates are close to replacement level). In contexts in which female employment is high and parental leave policies are generous, statistical discrimination against women of fertile age may be greater than any discrimination between mothers and nonmothers (cf. Mandel & Semyonov, 2005; Ruhm, 1998).

The disadvantages faced by mothers in the labor market compared to women without children or compared to men and fathers are linked to their lower labor market activity due to care responsibilities, not least of which are caused by parental leave. Job-protected, earnings-related parental leave facilitates mothers’ remaining in the labor market, and it has contributed to

¹Leaves to care for a child are not always supported by social policies such as parental leave. We indicate this point by referring to family leaves in this heading, but in the following, we use the term parental leave to also include family leaves.

high labor market participation, particularly for mothers with less education (Korpi, Ferrarini, & Englund, 2013). However, there are thresholds for when job-protected leaves become too long that make it difficult for women to return to the same job. A study by Pettit and Hook (2005) shows that although parental leave rights are positively linked to increased female labor force participation at the country level, parental leaves of 3 years or more discourage employment among women with small children. Hence, in countries where the job-protected parental leave is long, women have difficulties returning to paid work after the leave period is over. The length of the parental leave break also influences women's prospects in the labor market upon returning to work (Aisenbrey *et al.*, 2009; Gangl & Ziefle, 2009). Aisenbrey *et al.* show that in the United States, where women's national job-protected leaves are short and where the Family and Medical Leave Act gives parents the right to 3 months of unpaid leave, even short periods away from paid work are detrimental to women's careers. In Sweden, where parents can share 16 months of leave between them and norms suggest that children should not start day care before 1 year of age, women's careers are less affected by a parental leave break and are affected only for those taking more than a year of leave. The latter group experiences a reduced transition intensity to higher-prestige jobs, but no discernible increase in the risk of downward mobility is observed (Aisenbrey *et al.*, 2009; Evertsson & Duvander, 2011).

Theoretical explanations of why care-related absences tend to be linked to negative labor market outcomes relate to human capital theory and employers' expectations of employees. Human capital is the knowledge and skills required during education and work experience. During work interruptions, human capital does not increase and may even deteriorate due to, for example, missed on-the-job training and any changes to old routines or technologies (Mincer & Polachek, 1974). According to this perspective, human capital loses more in value the longer an employee is away from work. If human capital depreciation were the only explaining factor for any lower wages among those with work interruptions, all absences from the labor market would have a similar association with labor market outcomes, regardless of the reason for the absence (provided that the leave were not due to training or further education). However, studies of wage effects have found differences between different forms of absence, such as between different forms of care-related leaves and unemployment (Albrecht, Edin, Sundström, & Vroman, 1999; S.V. Arun, T. Arun, & Borooah, 2004; Theunissen, Verbruggen, Forrier, & Sels, 2011). The association is also stronger for men than it is for women (Albrecht *et al.*, 1999; Theunissen *et al.*, 2011) and has been found to be nonlinear among men (Evertsson, 2016). Therefore,

factors other than human capital depreciation are likely to influence the link between care leaves and wages.

One theory that, to some extent, challenges the assumptions of human capital theory is signaling theory. Signaling theory suggests that employers may perceive a career break as a signal of work commitment (Spence, 1973, see also Albrecht *et al.*, 1999). Relatedly, the wage- and career-related consequences of any work interruptions may vary, depending on the reason for the interruption and the degree to which an interruption is perceived as voluntary (Ketsche & Branscomb, 2003). In this context, men's parental leave taking may be perceived as more voluntary than women's parental leave taking and, as a result, men may be punished more due to taking parental leave compared to other forms of leave (Albrecht *et al.*, 1999).

Another theory that has implications for how employers value the transition to parenthood and any care-related leaves is expectation states theory. According to Ridgeway and Correll (2004), care work is devalued in society and, therefore, mothers, who carry the main responsibility for this type of work, are accorded a lower status than are nonmothers and men. Motherhood can be a signal that leads to expectations that a person puts less effort into work and is less capable. For example, mothers may be expected to be unwilling to work overtime and/or likely to leave work on short notice, for instance, when a child falls ill. By contrast, fathers are expected to be less engaged in care work and to be more committed employees due to their traditional breadwinner role and greater financial burden (i.e., providing for a spouse and children). Consequently, the implication is that fathers are more deserving of status than are men without children (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). If men take parental leave, then this behavior may be interpreted as a signal that they do a large share of the childcare in the household. By taking leave, they violate the conventional masculinity norms and the norms that portray fathers as the dependable financial providers for their families (cf. Acker, 1990; Connell, 1995).

Although there are undoubtedly other theories of relevance in regard to explaining the career-related consequences of the gendered transition to parenthood, these are some of the most prominent. However, it is important to note that human capital theory is the only theory that, ideally, should be of any relevance to the career-related consequences of parental leaves and family leave breaks. Any devaluation of care should not influence wages, and if commitment to the job is unaffected by any accumulated leave, then signaling effects should be unaffected as well.

To summarize, norms with regard to "good" mothering and fathering have different meanings in the workplace and in the home. They influence parents' division of care work and paid work and the manner in which family, friends, and employers (who expect men to take little responsibility for care) respond

to this division of work. Gender norms are internalized and imperative to our way of socially constructing motherhood and fatherhood. They influence how we act and the responses that we receive because of our actions, whether we like it or not, and whether we attempt to oppose the norms or not. Thinking in terms of social change and increasing gender equality, the greatest challenge seems to be relaxing the expectations placed on mothers to be self-sacrificing carers and instead raising the expectations placed on fathers. If fathers take a greater share of the leaves to care for small children, then any statistical discrimination against women in the labor market should decrease and the benefits to employers of using parental leave as a signal of work commitment should diminish. However, achieving changes along these lines is not an easy task; therefore, we argue for a stronger research focus on what we perceive to be examples of when norms with regard to “good” parenting hinder mothers from realizing their true and desired potential in their work lives. Similarly, we should devote special attention to the social structures, norms, and institutions that prevent fathers from realizing their full potential as carers. In the following, we provide some suggestions regarding how research may respond to this challenge.

THOUGHTS ON A FORWARD-REACHING FRAMEWORK

Although theories on relative resources/bargaining and specialization have been proposed to explain the gendered division of paid and unpaid work in the household, their applicability in regard to explaining the gendered transition to parenthood and parents’ division of care and labor market work in Western societies is more questionable. Nevertheless, parents often claim that financial considerations are among the main reasons why mothers, not fathers, spend time away from work on care (Almqvist, 2008; Schmidt, Rieder, Zartler, Schadler, & Richter, 2015). It is more beneficial for the person earning the most to invest more in paid work. According to a conflicting theory, it is the doing of gender and the gender norms that govern what is considered “good” mothering and fathering that are of most importance. Mothers are often perceived to be the main and most important carers, at least during the period of infancy, and frequently, there is variation in parents’ perceptions with regard to the point at which the child is considered able to be comfortably separated from its mother (Grunow & Evertsson, 2016; Miller, 2007, 2012). In an attempt to disentangle the prioritization of gender norms on parenting from financially rational decision-making, we propose the inclusion of same-sex parents in studies of gendered parenthood and labor market outcomes. By studying the extent to which the sex of the spouse determines how motherhood and fatherhood are socially constructed, researchers can begin to disentangle the processes

related to the reproduction of gender in the family and the labor market, employer expectations, potential discrimination, and the physical aspects of childbirth and breastfeeding. Such studies would specifically focus on the transition to parenthood for biological mothers to explore the extent to which the sex of the partner influences the mother's parental leave taking, care work, and subsequent labor market outcomes.

First, researchers could ask how the formation of motherhood and fatherhood identities interacts with biology to produce a division of paid work and care work in families with small children. Controlling for significant background characteristics, to what extent is an equal division of care (e.g., parental leave uptake) and paid work more common in same-sex couples than in heterosexual couples? With a focus on biological mothers, there should be no systematic differences in the extent to which they need to recover from birth in the two groups of couples.

Second, by focusing on the link between own care leaves and wages in the full group of mothers (comparing biological to nonbiological mothers in heterosexual and same-sex couples), studies have the potential to reveal any unfavorable treatment on the part of employers toward biological mothers compared to mothers who have not carried the child. A comparison of the wage outcome for leave taking among fathers and nonbiological mothers could also put the results in perspective and contribute to our understanding of motherhood penalties versus fatherhood premiums.

Studies such as those suggested above undoubtedly have limitations. Same-sex couples are special to the extent that—among other reasons—on average, they may have been working harder to become parents than many heterosexual couples do. This factor may have implications for their sharing of parental and care leaves. In addition, they may undoubtedly be exposed to other types of discrimination compared to heterosexual women and men. Nevertheless, studies indicate that, on average, homosexual women have higher wages than heterosexual women do (Waite & Denier, 2015). By controlling for wage levels before birth, selectivity issues such as these should be diminished when biological mothers in same-sex couples are compared to those in heterosexual couples. A second limiting factor is data availability. To conduct studies such as these, large-scale data that include a sufficiently large group of same-sex respondents for researchers to arrive at well-founded statistical results and conclusions are required.

The transition to parenthood is a complex and life-changing process. Studying it in detail requires innovative and, occasionally, complicated methods and research designs. Therefore, we would like to conclude with a few remarks regarding the potential benefits of combining statistical methods and large-scale quantitative studies with small-scale, in-depth interview studies. Both have their benefits and disadvantages, and given the

ways in which they may complement each other, we should not be afraid of considering a multi- or mixed-methods approach if such an approach has the potential to answer a given research question. One method by which to learn more about the complex process of the transition to parenthood is combining research on quantitative, longitudinal studies with qualitative, longitudinal in-depth interviews. By focusing on longitudinal data and interviews, researchers will be able to capture more fully the *process* without having to lean on retrospective accounts that may be biased due to recall error and adaptive preferences. Using fixed-effect models in large-scale, quantitative studies, researchers can control for over time stable characteristics that may influence selectivity into parenthood and its work-related outcome. In addition, small-scale qualitative studies can be used as a complement. Although they do not allow generalizations to the full population, they give us a unique understanding of some of the plans, expectations, norms, ideals, and institutions that frame how parents talk about and negotiate their way through the transition to parenthood and “become” mothers and fathers.

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