



Working fathers in Europe earning and caring?

A common conception of modern fatherhood is that there has to be a trade off between being a financial provider or an active carer. This briefing, drawing on an analysis of large-scale European survey data, which is both longitudinal and comparative, explores the possibility that a father's success and commitment as a financial provider does not necessarily prevent a similar commitment to the caring and nurturing aspects of fathering (Marsiglio 1995). In this study, earnings of co-residential fathers and non-fathers are compared in order to examine whether fathers who spend more time looking after their children work fewer hours and earn less than other fathers and non-fathers, for the period 1994 to 2001, in fourteen European countries.

Key findings

- While mothers across Europe still spend more time caring than fathers, there are considerable cross-national differences in father's participation in childcare
 - Fathers in the Nordic countries spend the most time caring for children and fathers in Greece and Portugal spend the least
 - There are considerable gender gaps in the amount of time parents spend looking after their children. Fathers spend between 11% and 33%, in Greece and Denmark respectively, of the total amount of substantial parental childcare time
 - On average, fathers across Europe earn more per hour than non-fathers, but they do not work longer hours
 - In the couple of years prior to becoming fathers, fathers-to-be are already earning more per hour than other non-fathers
 - Fathers within households in which mothers also have paid work spend more time caring for their children than other fathers, but whether this is because mothers are more likely to have paid jobs if fathers care more, or vice versa, is not known
 - On average, fathers who spend more time with their children also earn more per hour and work fewer hours than those fathers who spend less time with their children
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Combining parental care and parental financial commitments

As a man enters into parenthood, we might expect to see changes in his ability and willingness to do paid work as well as changes to the effort and time he devotes to domestic work. A father's labour market outcomes¹ are expected to differ from those of a non-father. He might be more inclined to work longer hours and be more ambitious as part of an effort to better provide financially for his new family, thus offsetting the increased costs of becoming a parent. Conversely, he might reduce his working hours and place greater emphasis on his domestic life as part of an effort to spend more time caring for his family. Two such competing strategies of co-residential fatherhood are found in the literature, namely that of the "good provider" and that of the "active father" (Kaufman and Uhlenberg 2000). The "good provider" model of fatherhood argues that fathers are likely to be the most productive group of men, as they need to earn more than non-fathers to meet their increased financial responsibilities. This will be even more the case for couples where the mother is not in paid employment to the same extent, but rather involved in domestic care. Alternatively, the "active father" model of fatherhood argues that if men are increasingly involved in actively caring for their children, there will be competing demands on their time, with paid work potentially losing out to unpaid childcare. This study looks beyond this simplistic dichotomy of fathers who provide versus fathers who care, and considers whether some fathers actually manage to do both.

Study aims and methods

The findings reported below are based on analyses of panel data from the European Community Household Panel (ECHP). The ECHP is a particularly unusual data source since it is both longitudinal and comparative. Through repeat annual interviews, this longitudinal survey follows men in the context of the households within which they live, for the eight years from 1994 to 2001. The survey provides information on time spent by respondents looking after children as well as rich socio-economic contextual information. The analysis focuses on a representative sub-sample of all working men, employed and self-employed, across the European Union². Results are reported for resident social fathers, i.e. men who are living in a household with dependent children for whom they care, regardless of their legal or biological connection to the child.

One of the limitations of much survey-style research is that it gives a snapshot of the social context being studied at one time only. On its own, it is unable to track changes over time or to identify the cause-and-effect of, for example, becoming a father by carrying out before-and-after studies. Longitudinal panel studies

are an attempt to respond to this problem. In such studies, the same sample of the population is surveyed at regular intervals, so that any changes over time can be measured and reported. By observing the same people each time, we can be sure that any changes are not due to differences between these individuals but rather to the individuals themselves having changed over time in response to the phenomena we are trying to measure, in this case, becoming a father.

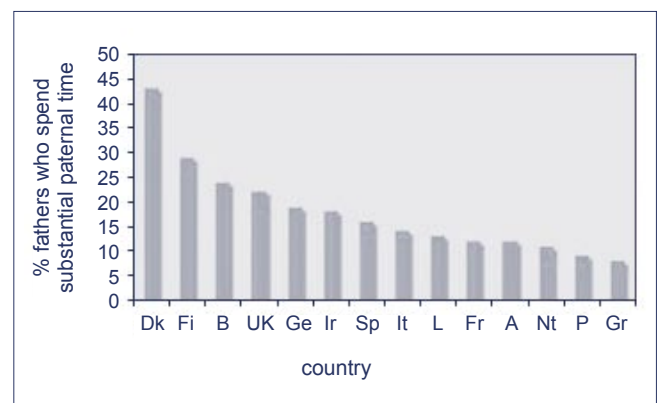
Main findings

Fathers and the time they spend looking after their children

The time that fathers spend looking after their children is measured here in terms of 'substantial paternal time'. This is defined as more than twenty-eight hours of childcare per week. About one fifth of European fathers of small children (under six years old) spend substantial paternal time by this definition. However, there are considerable differences between countries in the percentage of fathers who spend substantial paternal time. For example, 43% in Denmark and only 8% in Portugal³.

Figure 1.

The percentage of all fathers who spend substantial child care time:



Notes.

Estimates constructed using the European Community Household Panel (for 1996).

Substantial childcare time defined as more than 28 hours per week.

Children under six years old.

Mothers still do the lion's share of childcare in all countries. Looking at the amount of substantial parental time that is carried out by fathers as opposed to mothers, in other words, at the gender gap in parental time, considerable national variation is found. In Finland, for example, 30% of all substantial parental time is carried out by fathers in contrast to 11% in Greece⁴. This

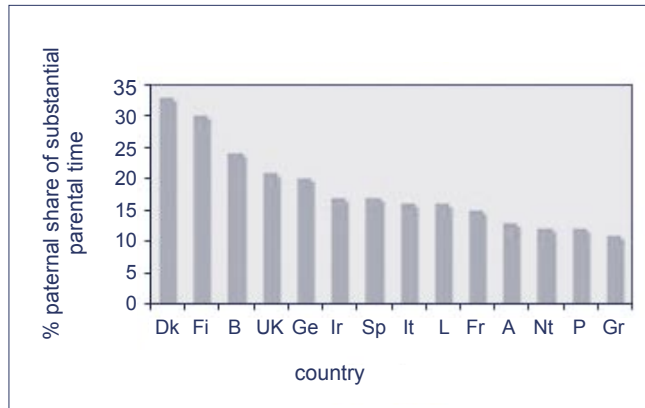
¹Labour market outcomes are measured in terms of both the number of hours worked per week and the hourly wage rate.

²The countries for which data are available include: Belgium (B), Denmark (Dk), France (Fr), Germany (Ge), Greece (Ge), Ireland (Ir), Italy (It), Luxembourg (L), The Netherlands (Nt), Portugal (P), Spain (Sp) and the United Kingdom (UK).

³Figures are derived using the ECHP for 1996 for fathers of small children (under six years old).

cross-national variation cannot be solely explained by socio-economic and institutional differences across countries but seems to be also a product of cultural variation.

Figure 2.
The percentage of substantial child care time spent by fathers (as opposed to mothers): by country



Notes.

Estimates constructed using the European Community Household Panel (for 1996).

Substantial childcare time defined as more than 28 hours per week.

Children under six years old.

Fathers and their increased financial responsibilities

On average, across Europe, non-fathers earn between 2-6% less than fathers, when adjusted for factors such as age, level of education, marital status, occupational status and sector of employment. In terms of weekly working hours, there seems to be very little difference between fathers (without reference to different levels of childcare time), fathers-to-be, and childless men.

Saving for parenthood?

Whilst fathers are found to earn more than non-fathers as a whole, there are also differences between two groups of non-fathers. Those men who are fathers-to-be i.e. men who are within two years of becoming fathers, are earning more, on average, than other childless men. In terms of weekly working hours, there seems to be very little difference between fathers-to-be and other childless men.

On average across Europe, childless men earn 5-6% less and fathers-to-be earn 2-3% less than fathers, after adjusting for other factors. One possible explanation behind this observation is that fathers-to-be are pursuing higher paid jobs in order to save up in preparation for becoming fathers. Another possible

explanation might be that men who command a higher rate of earnings are more likely to attract a partner with whom to have children.

Caring and earnings

Looking at the time that fathers spend looking after their children in relation to their earnings and working hours, we find that fathers that care more also earn more. Fathers who report spending a higher level of paternal time earn around 1% more than other fathers. This is not necessarily linked to longer working hours. To the contrary, fathers who report spending the highest level of paternal time⁵ work slightly shorter hours than all other men. In contrast, those fathers who report spending the lowest level of paternal time work slightly longer hours than other men.

Much has been said in the sociological literature about the way mothers and fathers share out the parental roles of earning and caring. In this study, both the mother's financial contribution and the father's contribution to care are important factors. This is supported by the further finding that fathers in parental households where both parents work are more likely to spend a higher level of time looking after their children than fathers in households with stay-at-home mothers.

This new perspective has strong implications for children's life chances. Given that children do better in terms of educational attainment and social position in adulthood when their parents are wealthier (e.g. Scott 2004) and that they do better when their parents invest more time in them (Buchel and Duncan 1998; Cooksey and Fondell 1996; Furstenberg, Morgan, and Allison 1987), these findings lend strong support to the argument that sharing caring and earning roles between parents can be considered as an optimal strategy for co-residential parenthood.

Conclusions

These findings can be used as evidence that the categorisation of resident fathers as either good providers or active carers fails to properly describe modern fatherhood. Rather, it is more appropriate to think about the differences between the super-dad and the struggling-dad. Typically, a super-dad is a father simultaneously successful in the labour market and as a carer. A struggling-dad is a father with less success in the labour market and also as a carer. In other words, those fathers who spend the most time with their children also experience the most favourable labour market outcomes. Social inequality is a matter of the capacity for family life, not just about material provision.

Despite institutional and other cultural differences between the member states of the European Union (1994 to 2001), there is a clearly observable and

⁴Ibid.

⁵A higher level of paternal time in this case refers to co-residential fathers who reported spending at least 28 hours per week looking after children.

consistent positive relationship between pay and parenthood across countries. There is a fatherhood wage premium, which begins before a man becomes a father. This can be explained in one of two ways: a structural explanation might suggest that there is a higher probability that successful men become fathers; or, an agency based explanation might suggest that men are aware of the costs of fatherhood (and/or the costs of attracting someone to have children with) and are planning accordingly. That fathers-to-be are found to exhibit more favourable labour market outcomes than other non-fathers, all things being equal, perhaps suggests that some men are already aware before they become fathers that achieving a certain position in the labour market will not only increase their likelihood of fatherhood but also better

enable them to spend more time looking after their children when they do become fathers.

Implications for policy

That fatherhood and labour market outcomes are intrinsically linked has significant policy implications:

- Reducing the number of hours that a father works, whilst increasing his hourly wage rate, creates a father who is both a good financial provider and an active carer.
- Pre-fathers and other non-fathers are not the same in terms of their labour market outcomes. Becoming a father is positively associated with a man's labour market situation. Thus, labour market outcomes appear to be linked to male fertility.

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