

Parenting values in academic discourse on paternity leave: Norway and Estonia compared

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In this paper, we compare the value discourses concerning parental roles, and in particular the role of the father in the family with minor children, as presented in the articles by researchers of two countries – Estonia and Norway.

Family policies and parental leave arrangements are part of a wider welfare ideology of a country reflecting the understanding of the division of responsibilities between the state, the market, an individual and the family. Two countries were chosen as our case-study examples for their similar social legacy of female labour market participation and public childcare arrangements. Norway is a representative of the Nordic social-democratic welfare regime which is also characterized by a high labour market attachment of women compared to most of the EU countries. Furthermore, with its generous gender-neutral family policy, Norway is recognized as one of the forerunners of gender equality. On the other hand, the family policy measures in Estonia were targeted to working mothers as parenthood was equalled to motherhood under the Soviet regime, and the most important role of an individual was that of a worker. The situation changed in the 1990s when Estonia regained its independence and introduced new family policy measures which have become more egalitarian.

There have been major differences in the welfare regimes in the past as well as in the present, and we hypothesize that these differences may have shaped, as well as have been shaped, by the public discourses used in public debates, represented here by academic discourses.

Key words: paternity leave, parenting, welfare regime, Estonia, Norway

INTRODUCTION

Countries may share similarities in the framing of certain policy issues and present differences in others, as each issue has a different institutional and political history (Verloo et al. 2007). Our study was focused not on policy analysis but on the analysis of academic discourses on a certain policy-relevant sphere which is subject to similar diversity. We compared the value discourses concerning parental roles, in particular the role of the father in the family with minor children, as presented in the articles by researchers of Estonia and Norway. The two countries were chosen for their similar social legacy of a high female labour market participation and a high coverage of public childcare arrangements.

Our main question is about the gender-normative matter of paternal leave, which belongs to the sphere of the division of roles in the family: how a scientific discourse, the most progressive sphere of public discourse, argues why fathers should use parental leave. We hope to provoke thought on the similarities as well as dissimilarities in the ways researchers deal with universal family policy issues.

THEORETICAL APPROACH

According to Walby (2004), gender regimes are categorized according to whether women are treated as mothers or workers; whether care is provided through services, money to purchase services or money to provide care oneself; and the actual outcome in terms of women's income and well-being. Walby's central thesis is that there is a continuum along which gender regimes move from *domestic* to *public*. Verloo and Lombardo (2007: 28) state the importance of considering the *'fundamental issue of the /.../ broader definition of 'political' that includes all the so-called 'private' and 'personal' issues, which were traditionally excluded from the public sphere'*. Verloo and Lombardo note that in the classical feminist debate, the two spheres are deeply interrelated, and the so-called 'private sphere' is seen as political because problems that are labelled 'personal' in fact are regulated by the state and are caused by, perpetuated, or solved through political means.

There are two directions we can identify for initiatives and transformations to occur in social policy: top-down and bottom-up approaches. The influence of the latter to policy-making is not visible directly but can be investigated by looking at the different arguments used during policy-making process. Academic research available on policy-relevant issues – paternity leave being one of these – is hereby seen as an influential component of knowledge-based policy making, regardless of academics themselves seeing as their role. Published academic research belongs to the public sphere, and while acknowledging the specificities of academic discourse (Ahl 2002; Agger 2000) it is nevertheless considered a public conversation. Following Foucault, Ahl (2002: 57) sees public conversation as *'practices which systematically form the object of which they speak'*.

According to Bacchi (1999), the different approaches to policy are the scientific traditions aimed at finding solution to the problem either by identifying it (comprehensive rationalists) or by defining it (political rationalists), and a rather post-modern approach concerned with problem representation. In line with the latter tradition, she comes up with a de-constructivist approach called 'what's the problem?'. Following Bacchi's (1999) framework, we aim at unveiling what the problem is represented to be. *'Talking about something as a 'problem' or as a 'social problem' has a whole range of implications which need to be thought about'* (Bacchi 1999: 5), and paternity leave as such may be seen as a solution to a number of different problems. The problem does not exist *per se*, but is constructed by those who are looking for a solution – in our case, by the social scientists in Norway and in Estonia who are researching issues of paternity leave. Social scientists have the luxury to look at their society from aside, but they also share the social environment of this society (Ahl 2002). Even though scientists are part of the international research communities, they are not free from the impact the origin culture has on their agenda-setting. We would like to determine whether the researchers share their understandings or whether they differ in a noteworthy way.

Ridgeway and Correll (2004) suggest that hegemonic cultural beliefs about gender act as rules of the gender system, and they have self-fulfilling effects on perceptions and behaviours that give them an ability to persist in the face of social change. Verloo, Lombardo (2007) add that processes shaping the meaning of gender equality can be both intentional and unintentional. According to them, the implicit framing of issues may occur as actors can be driven to shape an issue in a particular way due to unintentional biases of which they often are unaware. Hegemonic discourses can be identified as the background where specific policy frames are

articulated, by setting the borders within which frames can move. This is, for instance, the case of the labour market, which creates a horizon in which discourses on reconciliation and family policies are inserted, opening and at the same time limiting the possibilities of framing the issue in other directions (Verloo, Lombardo 2007). If these hegemonic discourses shape those used by academics, this provides us a unique opportunity to analyze the values and norms emerging from self-reflective research, enabling to reveal the possible culture-specific traits alongside with more universal traits.

SAMPLE AND METHODS

We included the academic texts that met the following criteria. First, paternal leave had to be one of its central topics. Second, it analysed the situation in Estonia / Norway. Third, Estonians / Norwegians were among the authors. The fourth requirement was accessibility of the texts both to us as researchers and to policymakers. Finally, we only included academic texts and excluded work written by functionaries or other. The texts sampled were published in 1998–2009. For this analysis, it makes no difference whether the texts focus on the men's use of parental leave or 'fathers quota'. We include both. Up to date, there is no special month appointed to fathers in Estonia. However, papers analysing men's take up of 'daddy days' around the childbirth or taking time off work to be with their ill children, as well as articles about the popularity of all other leaves fathers are entitled to for family reasons, remain out of the scope of current analysis.

The sample consists of seven Norwegian papers written in English and four Estonian texts, two of which are research reports and two academic articles. Estonian material is in Estonian, except Turk's report (2009) which is in English. As the parental benefit system that supports fathers' leave came into effect only in 2004, Estonian research on paternal leave is relatively new and small in number. This is inevitably reflected in our sample.

To compare the values of Estonian and Norwegian researchers regarding paternal leave, quantitative and qualitative techniques were combined. We did not predefine the discourses, but the discourse categories gradually emerged from the material. We looked at the frequency of the use of discourses, and also at which point in the article they were presented. For example, we considered it worth of comparing which values authors applied while introducing or concluding their articles. Qualitative procedures included more detailed observations of what different researchers really claimed and wished for when using a similar vocabulary. We also observed how much rationale and emotional stress authors invested in the values they presented.

For results, qualitative analytic procedures might be more informative than quantitative.

It is complicated to compare the Norwegian sample consisting of seven and the Estonian sample consisting of only four papers. Regarding character marks, the Estonian sample is bigger, including two research reports which are a longer genre compared to short papers in the Norwegian sample. Still, most character marks in reports are concentrated in the chapters presenting research results, which is not the richest section when looking for value discourses. To minimize this shortcoming when comparing the status of a discourse between two national samples, we take into account its popularity in relation to other discourses within a national sample.

In some articles, distinguishing between authors' own value statements and reiterations of official policy aims was complicated. It is not a serious problem here because of the informative role academic research has for policy formation, as we expect academic and political rhetoric to be rather interlaced in societies that aim at knowledge-based decision-making.

RESULTS

The analysis revealed that, in general, Estonian and Norwegian researchers value paternal leave for similar reasons. Gender equality, choice and flexibility, and the father–child relationship belong to the top three ideals in both national samples; strong family has the fourth position in Norwegian and fifth in Estonian papers. However, researchers fill the same value discourses with a differing content. We will introduce the qualitative differences of the application of those value discourses below.

Besides the most frequently presented values which are common in two national samples, both Norwegians and Estonians present the ideals that are marginal among their colleagues of the other country. Among Estonians, for example, it is a norm to tie paternal leave to the hope for increase in birth rate. Their articles begin with references to dying out as a nation (Turk 2009) and large-scale social problems in the coming years due to the ageing of population (Pajumets 2007). Norwegian researcher Ellingsæter (2007) emphasizes children's right to home care by their parents, and advocates fathers' leave taking as a means to it. Although fascinating, culture-specific discourses were poorly represented in the sample as a whole and will therefore give floor for the introduction of more emphasised value discourses.

Gender equality

Paternal leave is valued most often for being an instrument and evidence of gender equality in society. It is more than three times as topical as the second most popular value in the sample. Gender equality is especially prevalent in the discursive preferences of Norwegian authors who apply it roughly twice as often as their Estonian counterparts.

The prominence of gender equality among other ideals in the Norwegian sample can be seen by the mere presence of the term. Estonian researchers seldom use this label, some escaping it completely and preferring euphemisms like '*more equal division of household chores between spouses*' (Toming 2007: 66).

Another evidence of the normativity of gender equality discourse among Norwegian researchers is applying it as an opening value in their articles. For example, Lappegård (2008: 139–140) is rather typical in this sense, starting with the sentence '*Norwegian family policy has been oriented towards promoting equalization between parents, with regard to both practical parenting (childcare) and economic parenting (breadwinning)*'. In the Estonian sample, the paper by Karu and her co-authors (2007) is an exception with the critique of outdated gender stereotypes that are hindering the progress of gender equality.

Besides the practises mentioned, Norwegians attribute prominence to gender equality by attaching it to more a comprehensive equality ideal. Brandth, Kvande, for example, begin their article:

"The Scandinavian welfare states appear to be at the 'cutting edge' in an international context when it comes to creating a more egalitarian society. The increased participation of women in paid employment, higher education and politics stands out as a unique change in a relatively short time span" (Brandth, Kvande 2001: 251).

The logic seems to imply that if you are for '*social justice*' (Ellingsæter 2007: 50), you are for equality between men and women, for it is an intrinsic dimension of broader societal

progress. Norwegian authors' tendency to pack gender equality together with noble, irresistible ideals raises a question: do they perceive equality between men and women to need external legitimization?

Estonian researchers, on the contrary, are rather hesitant as to ideals of such a grand ambition. As mentioned above, gender equality is the most popular value discourse also among Estonians, but they legitimate it with a different tone and set of arguments. It is rather amusing to observe Estonian researchers' eagerness to justify gender equality by listing its practical employability and their discretion in linking it to broader *liberté, égalité, paternité* ideals rather common in Norwegians' argumentation:

"... men stay at home to get a break from routine work life, and women welcome it as a chance of variety and a way out of sitting at home tending a child. It means breaking up and redistributing gendered patterns of behaviour. In a sense it implies equalization. Parents have to have equal opportunities that will be achieved by abandoning the hitherto prevailing divisions" (Karu et al. 2007: 72).

Another difference between the two samples lies in the researchers' considerations regarding the primary beneficiary of gender equality. Several Norwegian researchers seem to value fathers' leave mostly as a means of strengthening women's foothold in the professional sphere. Duvander and her colleagues, for example, associate fathers uptake of parental leave with '*gender equality in the couple as it allows the woman to return to work faster*' and '*enhancing the reconciliation of work and family life, especially for women*' (Duvander et al. 2007: 2). Ellingsæter (2007: 54) emphasises '*facilitating continuous employment among mothers*'. Although Estonians second them by praising equal opportunities in the labour market (Karu et al. 2007), they stay balanced by emphasising also the benefits that men could get from greater equality. Estonians even employ a minor value discourse focusing on men's extending welfare while taking a break from work life (Karu et al. 2007; Turk 2009; Pajumets 2007), missing in the Norwegian sample. For Norwegian researchers, women's equal position in the labour market seems to be such a priority that it leaves little room for considering women's alternative lifestyle preferences.

The normative status Norwegian authors give to a dual-career family seems to stem primarily from the gender equality and not from some other substantial concerns like fighting the poverty of families or securing equal opportunities for children.

Father–child relationship

Relationship between father and his children shares the position of the second and third most popular value discourse together with choice and flexibility. In comparison with the leading value they are though to be poorly represented. The father–child relationship was slightly more pronounced in the Estonian sample, holding the second place among Estonian and the third among Norwegian researchers' most often applied value discourses.

Early father–child bond was a value every single researcher was committed to. There are still interesting differences in space and emotional stress that Estonians and Norwegians devote to it. The former are worried about children's inadequate contacts with their fathers and declare an urgent need to explain the importance of father to the child development (Karu et al. 2007; Pajumets 2007). Toming (2007) quotes andrologists and psychologists who tie fathers' active presence to the children's quality of life as adults:

“Nobody can replace father, especially his positive impact on child’s cognitive development in the first years of life. A child whose development has been supported by active father has advantages in evolving his or her inner qualities. The child will gain a positive view of him- or herself that will be accompanied by self-confidence, high morality, mental and social efficiency” (Toming 2007: 67–68).

Concurrently with explanations of the value of the father–child bond to children, some Estonian researchers present it as a means to improve fathers’ quality of life. Norwegians, on the contrary, pervaded the whole father–child relationship discourse as if passing by. Typically, they paired it with other value discourses like raising the birth rate or, more characteristically, to gender equality:

“Hence we can claim that beyond the intention of contributing to the welfare of young children, another aim has been to achieve gender equality by strengthening the ties of men to the family and the ties of women to working life” (Brandth, Kvande 2002: 186).

The question of whether paternal leave is more of a right or an obligation fathers must conform to is also intriguing. Especially at the framework of fathers’ quota, Norwegian authors are rather keen on waving slogans like ‘*granting the special rights for fathers*’ (Brandth, Kvande 2002: 186), ‘*the expansion of fathers’ social rights to care*’ (Leira 1998: 363) and ‘*exclusive right of fathers*’ (Lappegård 2008: 156). Curiously enough, it does not seem to be fathers that are pushing this famous and costly reform. The motivation comes from outside and is at times even in an antagonistic relationship with fathers whose ‘social rights have been expanded’. Active fatherhood is obviously something that needs to be bolstered (Brandth, Kvande 2001; 2002; Ellingsæter 2007; Lappegård 2008).

There is no reason to consider Estonian female researchers blind to the emancipatory opportunities the normalization of the nurturing father role would open up to women. They probably share the ideal of gender balance with their Norwegian colleagues. The main difference lies not in the ideals but in the discursive techniques the researchers of different nations employ for the same end. While Estonian authors mostly try luring men into taking a bigger responsibility at home, Norwegians combine flattery with coercion.

Choice and flexibility

Freedom of choice, options, individuality, negotiations, reflexivity are the vocabulary very characteristic of the late modern academic research on paternity leave. They form the core of choice and flexibility discourse which is second popular in the Norwegian sample and has the third place among Estonian researchers’ discursive preferences.

Division of parental leave that could be tailored to the needs of each individual father and family is presented both as a right in itself (Turk 2009) and as an inescapable adaptation to external world increasingly characterized by ‘flexible working hours and boundless jobs’ (Brandth, Kvande 2001).

Researchers from Norway, a country that has developed an advanced system of leaves, and from Estonia that hasn’t, alike criticize their state for its limited response to fathers’ call for flexibility. Both Estonian authors (Turk 2009; Karu et al. 2007; Pajumets 2007) as well as their Norwegian colleagues criticize their welfare state for injustice done to men’s freedom of choice:

“Even though the parental leave program is intended to promote gender equality, it has a gender-inegalitarian component whereby the father’s eligibility for leave is dependent on the mother’s work status, but not vice versa” (Lappegård 2008: 140).

Norwegian researchers could have interpreted fathers’ derived right as a resourceful tactic that the state feminism employs to strengthen mothers’ foothold in professional life by motivating women to postpone childbirth before establishing themselves in the professional sphere. As can be seen, improving women’s position is not their only agenda.

Interesting interpretations of the essence of the freedom of choice appear in the ways paternal quota is assessed in the two samples. Despite valuing fathers’ leave-taking and awareness of the ‘use or lose’ daddy-month policy in the Nordic countries, Estonian researchers do not praise this regulation. On the contrary, they are rather hesitant to its unpredictable influences:

“... fathers and employers alike regard daddy month /.../ a constraint rather than an opportunity or choice. In some cases there is a risk, this policy could produce strain and conflicts between family members” (Karu et al. 2007: 72).

Estonian sociologists do not foster daddy month, not to mention interlacing state’s normative instructions with the ideals of flexibility and choice. Several Norwegian researchers, on the contrary, see no antagonism between them. Leira (1998) as well as Brandth and Kvande (2001, 2002) assert that state’s prescriptions indeed help fathers in exercising their preferences by improving their position in negotiating with reluctant employers.

“... fathers cannot be ‘forced’ into staying at home through leave schemes, but strong guidelines can be established for their choices. Fathers need help from the ‘state’ to set limits and make it legitimate to take leave from work. Thus schemes based on wide flexibility and options become unsuitable as they leave too much of the negotiations to ‘father and company’. Conversely, if schemes based on restricted options and ‘gentle force’ are used, the state becomes an active third party in the negotiations” (Brandth, Kvande 2002: 201–202).

Contrary to Estonian researchers with more ambivalent feelings toward top-to-down regulations, in Norway there certainly has been a long and satisfactory tradition of cooperation between the state and citizens, which is short in Estonia.

Strong family

Strengthening the family institution is the forth-popular value discourse slightly more pronounced in the Norwegian articles.

The researchers of the two countries concur that in late modernity professional life has attained a priority that often leaves scarce resources for other interest. Norwegian authors blame the new trends in working life whereby the workplace is becoming more and more seductive and greedy (Brandth, Kvande 2001; 2002), Pajumets (2007) likewise criticizes the world of values, focusing on the rapid growth and short-term goals that prevail in Estonian society. Toming (2007: 65) conformably slights Estonian society’s orientation to economic progress *‘that results in social tolerance to fathers’ withdrawal from their children and homes and /.../ submersion into work’*.

Interestingly enough, researchers’ concern about the shrinking family time does not make them into the spokesmen of part-time jobs or the culture of housewives and, why not,

husbands. By default, they seem to consider a time-squeezed dual-career family inevitable in the late modern working life. As is shown above in the Gender Equality section, Norwegian researchers especially idealize women's equal foothold to men's at working life. This implies the same amount of time spent in full-time jobs.

To solve the apparent conflict between the dual-career family model and the demand for more time to family, Norwegians (Brandth, Kvande 2001; 2002; Leira 1998) again look for help to the state. Of the two different leave schemes offered in Norway, Brandth and Kvande consider 'compulsory' paternity quota more effective in securing family-friendly outcomes compared to the more negotiable time account scheme:

"state-imposed compulsory parts of the leave system represent a better solution to the problems that might arise from the new working life" (Brandth, Kvande 2001: 265).

Although idealizing a strong family like their Norwegian colleagues, Estonian researchers, as demonstrated above, do not hurry in giving their blessing to fathers' quota as a means to achieving it. They are concerned about the discordance of its 'use or lose' principle with the principle of unrestricted opportunities of choice. Norwegian researchers do not focus on the threat to individualism; instead, they embrace the state's interference in the discourse of strengthening the family.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings of the present study, we can say that the academic discourse in Estonia and Norway on the issue of paternity leave is rather similar. In reasoning for the paternity leave, both Estonian and Norwegian researchers see the need to involve the state in securing a proper balance between genders and between family and work. Based on the prominence of different discourses, we see that the one which stresses child's best interest to be met in home care by its own parents is rather marginal and found only in the Norwegian academic analysis. Showing the importance of fathers for their children might be considered an exception, but it is more pronounced with the aims of equal rights. Furthermore, the interests of the child, of the mother, of the father, and those of the family as such are assumed to be rather the same, so no room is left to discuss them as different from each other or as different from or the same as the interests of society. There is no discussion of the consequences other than gender in / egalitarianism of the choice the parents make in terms of childcare; neither is the 'choice' outlined in these terms. This is different from the practices and policies in conservative welfare states and in liberal ones, the latter relying on private provision of care (and allowing for more divergence in patterns and providers) and the former relying on families as the source of proper care. The gender equality aspect seems to be prioritised over other aspects of the childcare arrangements. So, the dual career family with both parents taking care of the children in their early years is seen as the mainstream ideal combined with reliable public childcare later to be taken as granted.

For the researchers, the dual career family seems to be an ideal. Even when strengthening the family is seen as a goal, with demands for more flexibility in work arrangements, the gender egalitarian ideal does not really result in arguing for part-timing or staying out of the labour market. No remark was found in the discourse reflecting the need for society to be built around other values than participation in labour market. Arguments for father's temporary leave from labour market seem to be in line with the commitment to the social norm already

existing in society rather than constructing an alternative, questioning the primacy given to the role of the worker by the state as well as by the parents themselves. The centrality of work identity for fathers but also for mothers is taken for granted, as parents are primarily seen as 'taking a break from labour market' and 'returning to labour market', and this was clearly the case both in Norwegian and in Estonian papers.

To sum it up, we pose a question whether the founding of the two welfare arrangements do indeed differ, and to which extent. The further discussion of the cultural frameworks of the welfare systems would have some potential to the question of the direction the post-socialist countries are heading on to. The differences in academic discourses that we find may reflect the basic differences in institutions, but may also be due to the differences in how a researcher in a country sees or realises his or her role in initiating and participating in public discussions of the founding of a welfare state and its gender regime aspects.

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