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GENDER NORMS AT PLAY

A sociological study on new, first-time parents' attitudes towards the EU directive on earmarked paternity leave

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ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to examine gender norms in parental leave praxes and attitudes towards earmarked paternity leave. The starting point is a forthcoming EU directive on work-life balance for parents and carers that will implement earmarked paternity leave in Denmark by 2022. The empirical data consists of nine semi-structured interviews with six new, first-time parents (three couples). The study sets out to explore these first-time parents' contemplations about parenthood and their distribution of parental leave. Furthermore, their arguments in favor of and against earmarked paternity leave, respectively, are uncovered. The theoretical framework comprises Judith Butler's theory on gender performativity and Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of masculine domination as an example of symbolic violence. Based on the study, I observe that parental leave praxes are highly influenced by traditional perceptions about work, parenthood, and gender – including the persistent stereotype that the mother is the natural caretaker. Moreover, the study finds that the question of earmarked paternity leave is a complex and ambiguous matter. Among the new, first-time parents, there seems to be a trade-off between, on the one hand, idealistic attitudes towards gender equality and, on the other hand, pragmatic considerations of economy, work, and family life. Within the proposed framework of Butler and Bourdieu, these findings support previous studies in concluding that the distribution of parental leave continues to be highly informed by gendered norms, which are embodied and performed within the context of parenthood.

Keywords: *Earmarked paternity leave, parenthood, gender norms, gender discourses, performativity, Butler, Bourdieu*

POPULAR SCIENCE SUMMARY

This thesis explores parental leave praxes and attitudes towards earmarked paternity from a gender perspective. The starting point is the current skewed distribution of parental leave between men and women in Denmark. As a consequence of weak legislative support, Danish men take up much less parental leave than men in the other Nordic countries: An average of 32 days, equivalent to 10% of the total parental leave, whereas it is 20% in Norway and 30% in Sweden and Iceland. Today, Danish men have the right to two weeks of earmarked paternity leave. In contrast, a total of 18 weeks is reserved for the mother. However, The European Union has recently approved a new directive, which reserves two months (nine weeks) of earmarked leave for each parent in all Member States, including Denmark, from 2022. Based on nine qualitative interviews with six new, first-time parents, who are or have recently been on parental leave, the thesis aims to examine their perceptions of gender norms in parenthood, how they make sense of their distribution of parental leave, and further, how they argue for and against the forthcoming EU directive on earmarked paternity leave. The theoretical perspectives of the thesis comprise understandings of gender identity and performativity to examine how parental leave praxes and ideas about earmarked paternity leave is influenced by discourses and normative ideas about how to act “properly” as man and woman, respectively. The thesis finds that parental leave praxes among new, first-time parents are highly influenced by traditional perceptions about parenthood and gender – including the persistent stereotype that the mother is the “natural” caretaker, which comes to “naturalize” that she takes most of the parental leave. This is despite the fact the all of the couples show strong support in a more equalized distribution of the paternal leave. In this regard, a key observation is the importance of economic and work-related barriers determining the couple’s distribution of parental leave. Moreover, concerning their attitudes towards the EU directive on earmarked paternity leave, the study documents a high degree of ambivalence among the parents. Although they agree that such an initiative can benefit both mother and father and be “a step in the right direction” to reduce the skewed distribution of parental leave between men and women, the parents are skeptical of what they perceive as an invasive character of the legislation. Based on these findings, the analysis points to the fact that understandings of parental leave are still highly influenced by traditional gender norms and perceptions of mother- and fatherhood.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION.....	2
1.1 Introduction and background	2
1.2 Motivation and aim	9
1.3 Thesis statement and research questions.....	10
1.4 Delimitations	11
1.5 Outline	11
2. PREVIOUS RESEARCH.....	12
2.1 Gendered expectations at work and within the family	12
2.2 Economic conditions and structural rights	14
2.3 Earmarked paternity leave – effects and attitudes.....	14
3. EPISTEMOLOGY AND METHOD.....	16
3.1 Epistemological position: Social constructivism and post-structuralism.....	16
3.2 Research design and data collection	17
3.3 Sampling	20
3.4 Presentation of informants	21
4. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES.....	21
4.1 Judith Butler	22
4.1.1 Gender performativity	22
4.1.2 The heterosexual matrix.....	24
4.2 Pierre Bourdieu.....	24
4.2.1 The Masculine domination – objectified and embodied division of male and female.....	24
4.2.2 The androcentric social order.....	25
4.2.3 Symbolic violence.....	26
5. ANALYSIS	27
5.1 Gender roles within parenthood	28
5.2 Distribution of parental leave – gender praxis and determining factors	31
5.3 Attitudes towards earmarked paternity leave	40
5.3.1 Concerning status quo	40
5.3.2 Arguments in favor of the directive	43
5.3.3 Arguments against the directive.....	48
5.3.4 The paradox of perceived coercion	51
6. SUMMARY AND FINAL DISCUSSION.....	55
LIST OF REFERENCES	59
APPENDIX A	63

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction and background

“Many young men feel that it is obvious to take a part of parenthood on equal terms with their partner. It is, therefore, a paradox that the distribution of parental leave continues to be as skewed as the case is in Denmark. The skewness is primarily caused by the Danish legislation that distinguishes itself by giving the weakest possible support to paternity leave” (Jakobsen 2019, p. 6) [My translation].

This quote stems from an input to the debate about fathers’ rights to paternity leave written by cand.scient.pol and head of labor policy at DJØF¹, Edith Jakobsen. Jakobsen (2019) criticizes Danish politicians for failing fathers by not giving them better paternity leave rights, leaving their rights at a standstill. As she points out, a consequence of the weak legislative support in Denmark is that Danish men take up much less parental leave than men in other Nordic countries: namely, an average of 32 days, equivalent to 10% of the total parental leave, whereas it is 20% in Norway and 30% in Sweden and Iceland (Jakobsen 2019, p. 6; Cederström 2019, p. 7). Compared to Norway and Sweden, Danish policies on gender equality are and have historically been less rooted in political institutions. In Sweden, gender differences are generally (at least in theory) framed as a structural problem founded in a system of power and gender hierarchy, whereas the debate in Denmark has been more ambivalent and equivocal in this regard. Here, the argument that gender differences are the results of individual choices and qualifications is more salient (Borchorst 2004, p. 266). This has led to larger reluctance and more moderate political intervention when it comes to issues of gender equality in Denmark, including the distribution of parental leave (particularly among right-wing parties) (Borchorst 2004, p. 264; Borchorst 2006, p. 9). The development of Danish parental leave entitlements (specifically focused on fathers’ rights) during the past four decades is revised in the following within a Scandinavian comparative frame.

In 1980, law regulations gave women the right to four weeks *graviditetsorlov* (pregnancy leave) before giving birth and 14 weeks of maternity leave after (Borchorst 2003, p. 46). At this point, fathers were unable to take any part in the leave. This changed in 1984 when the leave was extended from 14 to 24 weeks, and 10 of the 24 weeks could be shared between the

¹ Danish trade union for academics.

parents. Further, the father became entitled to two weeks to share with the mother post-birth (Borchorst 2006, p. 12). In the 1980s, the Danish state supported a conservative family structure, which is evident by the fact that parental leave was solely a right reserved for the mothers before 1984. Even after 1984, when men got access to parts of the leave, their rights depended on their partners' (work and economic) status (Borchorst 2003, pp. 93-94; Borchorst 2006, p. 12). However, this changed in 1991 when fathers were secured their right to two weeks' leave regardless of the mother's status (Borchorst 2006, p. 13). Albeit the state gave men legal rights, it did not change the fact that women continued to take the majority of the leave (more than 90%) (Friis Olsen et al. 1995, p. 50). An important argument for the law amendment in 1984 that gave fathers' rights to leave was gender equality. However, the guiding principle was equality for mothers in the labor market, and political discussions about men's rights in the home were not particularly prominent (Rós Valdimarsdóttir 2006, p. 20). Following this, the status at the end of the 1990s was that as Borchorst (2006) puts it: "... policies concerning the adaption to a dual-earner family model were still predominantly directed towards women" (2006, p. 11).

In 1997, the parental leave was prolonged from 24 to 26 weeks, and this marked a radical shift in the construction of the leave as two weeks simultaneously became earmarked for the father (Borchorst 2006, p. 13). This became the first law amendment with a sole focus on fathers' rights to leave. The implementation of the earmarked leave was inspired by the Norwegian *fedrekvote* from 1993 and the Swedish *pappamånad* from 1995 (both four weeks), which had had significant effects. In Sweden, up to 90% of fathers used their right in the following years, and in Norway, the percentage of fathers on leave skyrocketed from four to 70% (ibid.; Cederström 2019, p. 19; Jul Jacobsen, Heegaard Klynge & Holt 2013, p. 38). However, earmarked paternity leave continued to generate a heated political debate in the Danish parliament (Borchorst 2004, pp. 270-271). Furthermore, it was subject to a very restricted debate in the media, and the Danish government did not encourage fathers to use the leave, nor did they launch campaigns similar to those of the Swedish and Norwegian governments (Borchorst 2006, pp. 13-14). Nevertheless, the uptake of parental leave among fathers increased significantly following the introduction of the father's quota. From 1997-2001, the percentage of fathers taking paternity leave in Denmark went from 12 to 36% – a threefold increase (Rostgaard & Lausten 2016, p. 289). This increase proved that the earmarked paternity leave was a success in terms of its purpose to create more gender equality in parenthood. Still, neither the media debate in 2001 nor the parliamentary debate a year later portrayed it as such

(Borchorst 2006, p. 16). Thus, the steep increase of men opting for parental leave following the implementation of the father's quota was never advanced as an argument in favor of keeping it.

Conversely, the perception of the newly appointed right-wing government in 2001 was that earmarked leave for men was coercion, an intervention in the private sphere, and a limitation of the individual's freedom of choice (Borchorst 2004, p. 271; Borchorst 2006, p. 16; Rostgaard & Lausten 2016, pp. 285-286). Consequently, the father's quota was abolished in 2002. At the same time, the total length of the parental leave was extended from 26 to 52 weeks, leaving the parents free to divide 32 weeks between them (Borchorst 2006, p. 18). This legislative change supports Rós Valdimarsdóttir's claim that "the emphasis in Denmark has been on giving parents as much flexibility as possible to use their leave in ways that best suit their needs" (2006, p. 31). As a consequence of eliminating the father's quota, the percentage of fathers taking up parental leave dropped significantly from 36% in 2001 to 22% in 2002 (Rostgaard & Lausten 2016, p. 289). This is closely linked to research showing that men do not opt for more weeks of paternity leave than what is earmarked for them (Reinicke 2015, p. 446).

With the abolishment of the father's quota in 2002, the Danish legislation moved in the opposite direction of the other Nordic countries that have extended the earmarked leave for fathers (e.g., Sweden who extended the quota from two to three months in 2016) (Rós Valdimarsdóttir 2006, p. 31; Duvander & Löfgren 2019, pp. 467-468). Thus, today, Danish fathers have reserved two weeks of leave, while fathers in Finland, Iceland, Sweden, and Norway have up to 9, 12, 14², and 21³ weeks reserved, respectively (Kosłowski et al. 2019, p. 13; Salmi et al. 2019, p. 195). Below is an overview of the total number of reserved weeks that fathers in each Nordic country are entitled to.

² Swedish fathers have a ten-day, temporary leave immediately after the birth besides the three *pappamånader* (90 days) (Kosłowski et al. 2019, p. 13).

³ In Norway, two weeks are reserved for the father after the birth, plus further 15 to 19 weeks of earmarked paternity leave (ibid.).

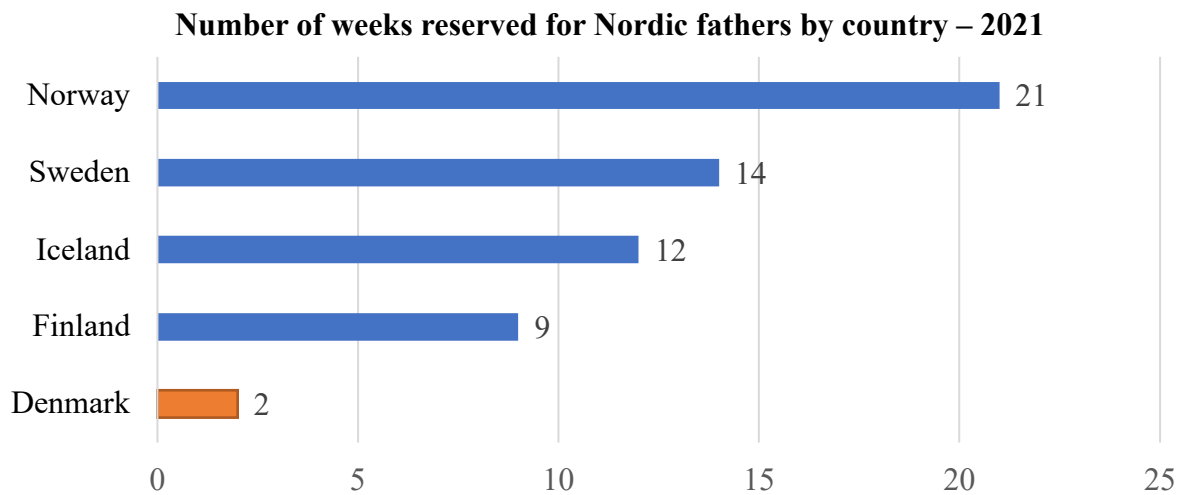


Figure 1. Overview of the length of earmarked paternity leave in each of the Nordic countries in 2021. They are listed from the country with the highest numbers of weeks to the country with the fewest (Koslowski et al. 2019, p. 13; Salmi et al. 2019, p. 195).

In contrast, Denmark reserves the longest part of the parental leave for the mother – a total of 18 weeks (Bloksgaard 2016, p. 142). Therefore, it has been suggested that the leave period in Denmark is based on the premise that women are often considered to hold the primary responsibility to care for the child (Borchorst 2004, p. 271). Thus, Danish legislation on parental leave has the most gender-specific construction in Scandinavia, although it is negotiated within a gender-neutral conceptual framework (Borchorst 2003, p. 130). This construction constitutes a form of double-sided inequality (Bloksgaard formulates this as an ‘equality paradox’ (Bloksgaard 2009, p. 98)): It keeps mothers at home with the baby, which has consequences for her career opportunities (and with that, her salary, pension savings, etc.), while it keeps fathers in the traditional breadwinner role and leaves them with weaker rights to participate in the childcare (Borchorst 2003, pp. 42-43). The current distribution of leave between mothers and fathers in Denmark is illustrated in the following figure.

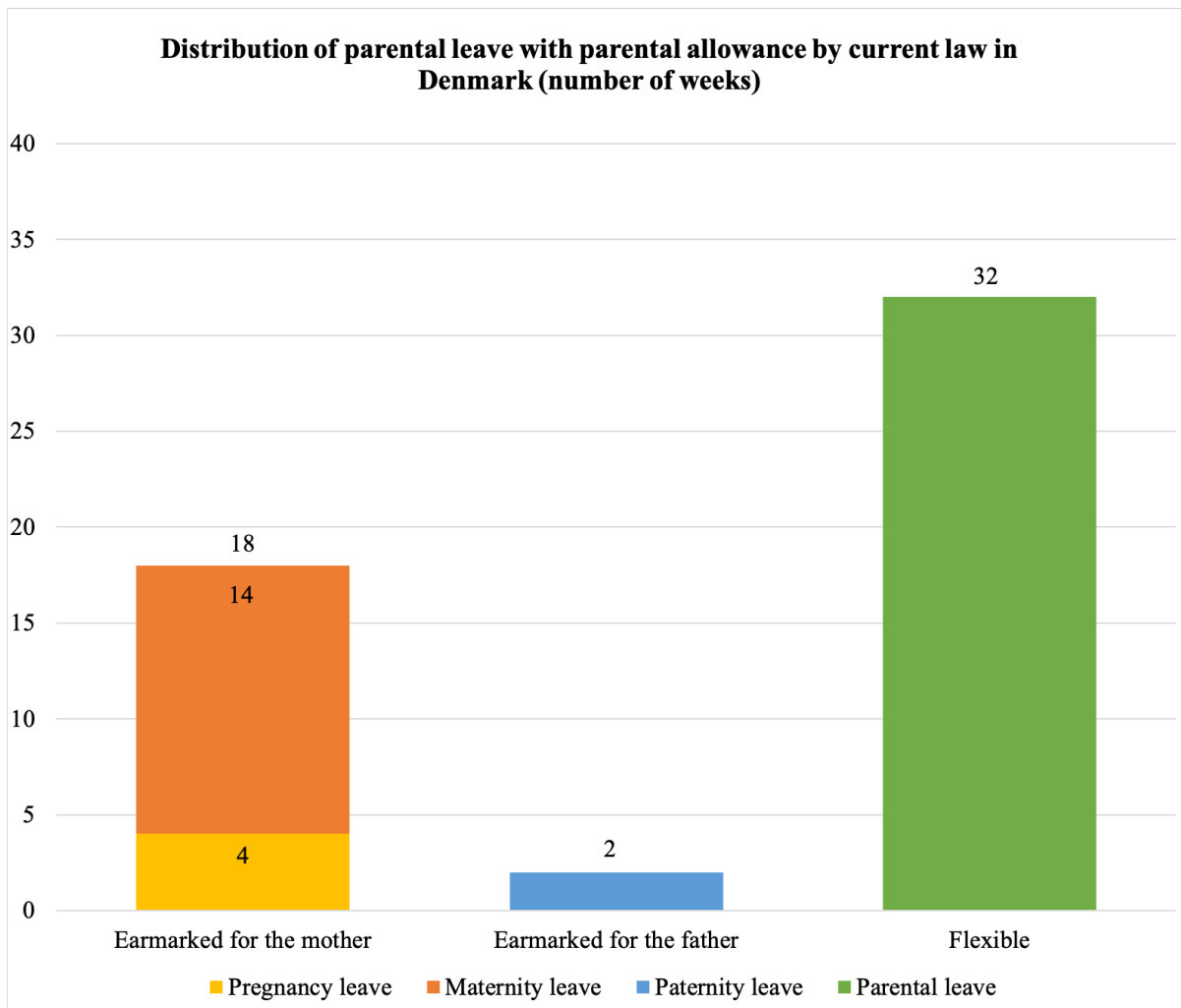


Figure 2. *Distribution of parental leave with parental allowance by current law in Denmark (number of weeks) (Steffensen, Laursen & Zuleta 2020, p. 44).*

According to the current legislation, mothers are entitled to four weeks of earmarked pregnancy leave plus 14 weeks of earmarked maternity leave. In contrast, fathers currently have two weeks earmarked paternity leave immediately after the birth of the child. In addition, 32 weeks are flexible, meaning that these weeks can be distributed between the parents as they wish. However, the latest numbers reveal that this part of leave is still primarily taken by the mother. Thus, while Danish fathers averagely spend 32,5 days on leave (10%), it is 280 days for mothers (90%) (Steffensen, Laursen & Zuleta 2020, p. 54). The following table shows the average distribution of leave between fathers and mothers in Denmark from 2015 to 2018.

Year	2015	2016	2017	2018
Fathers (number of days)	29	30	32	32
Mothers (number of days)	283	283	282	282
Fathers leave in %	9%	10%	10%	10%
Mothers leave in %	91%	90%	90%	90%

Table 1. The average length (number of days) and percentage of parental leave with parental allowance during the first year of the child's life for Danish fathers and mothers, respectively – from 2015 to 2018 (StatBank Denmark 2021).

Albeit men today spend more time on leave than before, the distribution between men and women is still substantially skewed. Moreover, the law amendment from 2002 is the latest regulation of parental leave, which means that Danish fathers have the same rights today as they did in 1984 – 37 years ago. A steady increase in the number of days men averagely spend on paternity leave can nonetheless be detected when looking at the development in Denmark during the last two decades. In 2003, Danish fathers averagely spent 19 days on leave – in 2018, it reached 32 days (Steffensen, Laursen & Zuleta 2020, p. 17). The numbers are visible in the figure below.



Figure 3. The average number of days Danish fathers spend on paternity leave (with parental allowance) 2003-2018 (Steffensen, Laursen & Zuleta 2020, p. 17).

The steady increase indicates that there is a growing interest among fathers in spending time on paternity leave. Yet, as Rostgaard and Lausten (2016) point out, this is an effect of a cultural change in the perception of fatherhood rather than a result of institutional support (2016, p. 297).

The question of earmarked paternity leave has, however, once again become topical in Denmark recently. In June 2019, The European Union approved a new directive on work-life balance for parents and carers, which reserves two months (nine weeks) of earmarked leave for each parent in all Member States, including Denmark (Directive (EU) 2019/1158). The new directive aims to contribute to gender equality by promoting a faster reintegration of mothers into the labor market and ensuring a more equal allocation of caring responsibilities within families. The directive does this by giving fathers a more prominent role as caretakers within the first period of the child's life – by the rationale that this will improve the wages and careers of mothers (Steffensen, Laursen & Zuleta 2020, p. 54). If one of the parents does not use these two months, they are forfeited and are therefore not transferable to the other parent⁴. The hope is that this incentivizes fathers to spend more time on leave (Steffensen, Laursen & Zuleta 2020, p. 46). The directive is not yet implemented into Danish law, but the Member States of The European Union must implement this by August 2022 at the latest. How the distribution of leave between Danish mothers and fathers will look like after the implementation of the EU directive is illustrated in figure 4 below.

⁴ *"Member States shall ensure that two months of parental leave cannot be transferred."* (Article 5, paragraph 2) (Directive (EU) 2019/1158).

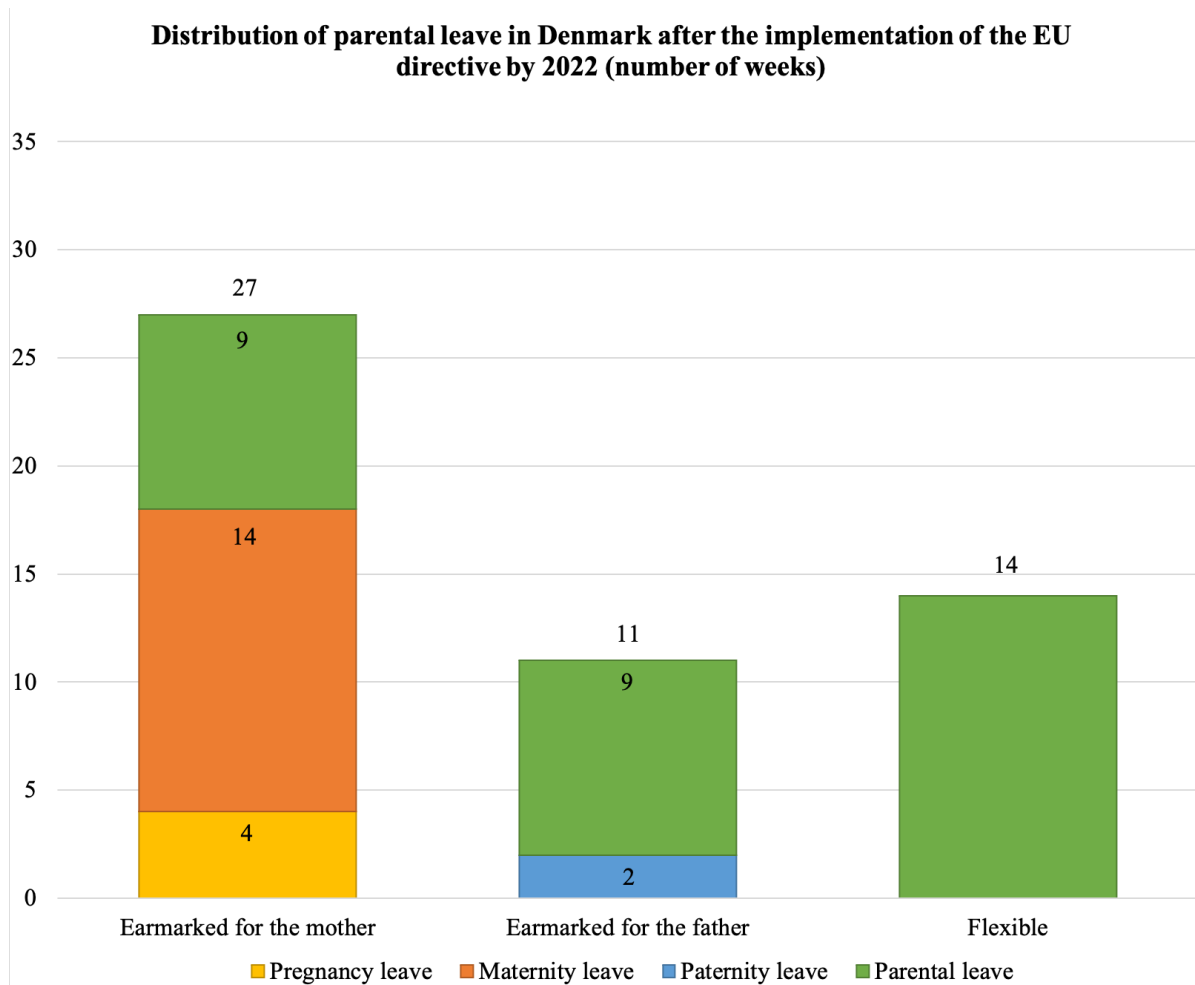


Figure 4. *Distribution of parental leave in Denmark after the implementation of the EU directive by 2022 (number of weeks) (Steffensen, Laursen & Zuleta 2020, p. 45).*

When the EU directive comes into effect from 2022, mothers will have 27 weeks of earmarked maternity leave, while fathers will have 11 earmarked weeks – none of which is transferable to the partner. If they are not used by the parent it is assigned to, they will be lost. Fourteen weeks will not be earmarked – this part is flexible, and it is up to the parents to decide how these weeks are distributed between them.

1.2 Motivation and aim

The initial motivation behind this thesis is the persisting skewed distribution of parental leave between Danish men and women and the standstill of men’s rights to paternity leave in Denmark, pointed out above (i.e., the ‘equality paradox’, as formulated by Bloksgaard (2009, p. 98)). Thus, I am motivated by a puzzle: Why Danish women continue to take most of the parental leave although fathers are more active in parenthood than ever before. Furthermore, I wonder why there is a continuous skepticism towards earmarked paternity leave. As I see it, it

is paradoxical that the argument for not implementing earmarked paternity leave is that it is coercion, while the total of 18 weeks of earmarked maternity leave that we have today is not perceived as such. Hence, I am motivated by the fact that parenthood and parental leave praxes in Denmark continue to be formed by stereotypical gender roles, culturally and structurally – something that might be altered by the coming EU directive on the matter.

This thesis aims to examine gender norms in parental leave praxes from the starting point of the EU directive on earmarked paternity leave. Thus, I wish to explore how the aforementioned skewed distribution of parental leave is constructed and reproduced through gender norms in parenthood and how these gender norms are expressed in praxis. From this, the thesis seeks to examine attitudes towards earmarked paternity leave among new, first-time parents. This leads me to my thesis statement.

1.3 Thesis statement and research questions

As stated above, the thesis will shed light on the expectations and attitudes towards earmarked paternity leave from the perspective of new parents. The thesis is based on the following thesis statement:

From the starting point of a forthcoming EU directive, this thesis aims to examine the attitudes towards earmarked paternity leave among new, first-time parents. In doing so, the thesis considers the role of gender norms within parenthood and social structures in forming personal preferences in relation to the distribution of parental leave.

Based on the thesis statement and the motivation and aim of the thesis, the study will seek to answer the following main research question:

1. What are the attitudes towards earmarked paternity leave among new parents?

The thesis will further answer the supplementary research questions below:

2. How do new parents relate to gender roles within parenthood?

3. Which gender norms are reflected in new parents' distribution of parental leave, and which factors explain their chosen distribution of the leave period?

1.4 Delimitations

It is important to state that this thesis does not aim to be representative of all new, first-time parents and their attitudes towards earmarked paternity leave. As it is a qualitative study of nine interviews, naturally, I will not be able to comment on a larger population or make any generalizations about gender roles within parenthood, parental leave praxes, or attitudes towards earmarked paternity leave. However, by its qualitative character, the study can bring forward nuances and perspectives on the issue in question and thus, contribute to the knowledge production concerning parental leave and earmarked paternity leave.

1.5 Outline

In the following, I will outline the structure of the thesis and explain how I intend to answer the research questions.

Firstly, previous research on parental leave and earmarked paternity leave is introduced to place my thesis within the context of other studies on the subject. Secondly, I will account for social constructivism and post-structuralism as my epistemological standpoint. This is followed by a review of the research design and data collection process. Here, I argue for the choice of method: semi-structured qualitative interviews, the sampling strategy, as well as a presentation of my informants – six new, first-time parents (three couples). Subsequently, I will present the theoretical perspectives, which in conjunction with the empirical data form the framework for the analysis. The theory section consists of two parts: I start by describing Judith Butler's theory on gender performativity, followed by a presentation of Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of masculine domination as an example of symbolic violence. In the analysis, the thesis statement and research questions are addressed. Here, it will be examined how new, first-time parents reflect on gender norms in terms of what is possible or inhibiting in relation to the distribution of parental leave. Moreover, I will examine their considerations about parental leave and parenthood based on the regulatory practices and their gender performances. Lastly, their attitudes about earmarked paternity leave are uncovered. The analysis is divided into three sections corresponding to my three research questions; thus, each section in the analysis serves to answer a research question. The subsequent discussion and summary of results consists of reflections on the work and results of the study and concludes the thesis.

2. PREVIOUS RESEARCH

This section will introduce previous studies on parental leave and earmarked paternity leave to put my research within the context of other studies on the issue. Moreover, the section aims to identify a potential research gap that the thesis can contribute to filling out.

2.1 Gendered expectations at work and within the family

In a study by Lotte Bloksgaard (2009), the interrelation between work-life, parenthood, and gender is analyzed. By interviewing employees and managers in three Danish companies, Bloksgaard examines individual negotiations of parental leave and which options men and women are given in the interplay between work and family life. The analyzed negotiations reveal that the gendered expectations of the “proper” ways of acting influence leave practices among fathers (Bloksgaard 2009, p. 254; Bloksgaard 2016, p. 15⁵). The study finds that men who are taking an extended parental leave are regarded as not making sense, as the notion of ‘the attentive father’ is still not associated with taking parental leave in a Danish context. Thus, her analysis shows that traditional conceptions of gender roles influence the practices of men and women and create ambivalences in those who are defying these conceptions. Furthermore, even though ideals of the present father are identified among the interviewees, the analysis suggests that fatherhood ideals cannot compete with the prevailing work ideal – at least not in a way that leads to lengthy parental leave use (Bloksgaard 2016, p. 155). Hence, while both women and men can take parental leave, Bloksgaard argues that the *actual* options for doing so are not equal among men and women (2009, p. 254).

Other studies offer similar conclusions; for instance, that there among some employers prevail an attitude that parental leave primarily belongs to the mother, which can be a hindrance for fathers in their negotiations on paternity leave (Deding 2010; Olsen 2005; Olsen 2002). Thus, there can be more or less tacit expectations from employers and colleagues in terms of the workplace culture, which constitute a barrier in terms of men’s parental leave praxes (Olsen 2002, p. 50). This is expressed in what can somewhere be a prohibiting culture, in which taking parental leave (especially among the older generations) is associated with feminine qualities, which can affect their career (Krogsgaard Niss et al. 2019, p. 44). For Danish men, paternity leave requires approaching their immediate superior with a request to temporarily prioritize

⁵ Bloksgaard (2009) and Bloksgaard (2016) refer to the same study (in Danish and in English, respectively).

family life over work-life, which is potentially rather difficult in a work-life characterized by demands for both flexibility and presence. In line with this, maternity leave is seen as a right and, therefore, *indisputable*, whereas paternity leave to a great extent, is *negotiable* (Steffensen, Laursen & Zuleta 2020, p. 29). When men's parental leave is negotiable and flexible, it, therefore, can and often *will* be adapted to the workplace. Thus, an important explanation for the limited leave use among Danish fathers described in several studies is that they must negotiate leave individually in the workplace without the support of legislation (*ibid.*; Bloksgaard 2016, p. 157; Deding 2010; Olsen 2005). This leaves men in an inferior position in terms of parental leave, which illustrates the discriminatory practice related to leave rights (Bloksgaard 2009, pp. 229-230).

Moreover, there is a widespread perception that parental leave is something “the woman takes” and therefore must be “stolen” if fathers want part of it (Bloksgaard 2016, p. 155; Olsen 2005, p. 50). This points to a prevalent mindset among many that parental leave by default belongs to the mother and that a more equal distribution requires that the mother hands over part of the leave. However, the perception among both mothers and fathers is that parental leave should not be “taken from the mother”, while fathers also express concern about depriving mothers of their rights (Steffensen, Laursen & Zuleta 2020, p. 29). Thus, despite the gender-neutral intentions in Danish parental leave schemes, the entitlement is automatically linked to motherhood and not fatherhood (Bloksgaard 2016, p. 155). This is confirmed in later studies that detect a tendency for women to still be seen as the caretakers and men breadwinners – despite new ideals of fatherhood and although women today are largely part of the labor market. As such, fathers are hesitant to take parental leave due to gender-stereotypical perceptions. In a study by Olsen (2002), in which she applies Bourdieu and his theory on masculine domination, it becomes evident how the feminine is connected to care and intimacy. Thus, Olsen concludes that the idea that the mother is the more natural caretaker is a highly persistent stereotype, which prevents men from imagining themselves on leave (2002, pp. 48-50). Accordingly, how men and women arrange themselves as a family, including how they distribute the parental leave, is still primarily characterized by traditional and normative conceptions about work, parenthood, and gender (Bloksgaard 2011, pp. 35-36; Steffensen, Laursen & Zuleta 2020, p. 22; Olsen 2002, p. 50). As the flexible part of the leave is generally perceived as belonging to the mother, she often has “precedence” to take this part. Therefore, it is argued that the so-called “free choice” related to the flexible parts of the leave is not as free as it is often made out to be (Bloksgaard 2011, p. 36; Steffensen, Laursen & Zuleta 2020,

p. 29). Consequently, Olsen argues against the premise that the distribution of parental leave should be a primarily conscious and entirely rational choice (2002, p. 50).

2.2 Economic conditions and structural rights

In all of the previous research on parental leave reviewed for this thesis, the economic conditions of the leave period are considered as the primary barrier for men in taking a longer leave (Duvander & Lammi-Taskula 2012, p. 59; Olsen 2007, p. 55; Steffensen, Laursen & Zuleta 2020, p. 22; 30; Jul Jacobsen, Heegaard Klynge & Holt 2013, p. 14; Krogsgaard Niss et al. 2019, p. 11). Since men have higher average salaries than women, it is more beneficial for the mother to take time off work and go on *barselsdagpenge* (parental allowance) (Olsen 2005, p. 113; Olsen 2002, p. 50; Bloksgaard 2011, p. 19; 37; Deding 2010, p. 110). For this reason, fathers are less inclined to take part in the flexible part of the parental leave (Olsen 2007, p. 55; 69; 74). Therefore, proper wage compensation is an essential element in getting more fathers to go on paternity leave (Bloksgaard 2011, p. 37; Deding 2010, p. 110). However, for new parents, it is not solely a matter of weighing whether they have the money to let the father receive parental allowance for a period of time. For some couples, it is also an actual assessment of whether the father is even allowed by his workplace to take leave (Steffensen, Laursen & Zuleta 2020, p. 30). Related hereto, Bloksgaard finds that men's actual leave practice fluctuates in accordance with the parental leave rights offered within the specific workplace (2009, p. 254). This indicates that it is crucial to seek to create change by means of structural rights, which can support men and women in counteracting the gendered patterns produced at the workplace (Bloksgaard 2009, p. 255; Duvander & Lammi-Taskula 2012, p. 60).

2.3 Earmarked paternity leave – effects and attitudes

In relation to the above, studies emphasize that legislation affects men's leave praxes when an earmarked leave period that cannot be transferred to the mother is offered (Jul Jacobsen, Heegaard Klynge & Holt 2013, p. 15). Thus, earmarked leave that is forfeited if not used has proven to effectively fulfill the aims of increasing father care and more equal co-parenting (Brandth & Kvande 2016, p. 287). In relation hereto, various studies advocate for the importance of having contractual paternity leave rights (Bloksgaard 2011, p. 38; Olsen 2002, p. 50; Deding 2010). The rights reserved (i.e., earmarked) for the father legitimize and normalize paternity leave, and the fact that these are *rights* makes men more inclined to consider the leave period as something they should use (Olsen 2007, p. 9). At the same time,

earmarking sends a strong signal to the labor market and helps to set standards for an “appropriate” length of paternity leave and boundaries between work- and family life (Jul Jacobsen, Heegaard Klyngne & Holt 2013, p. 8, Bloksgaard 2009, p. 54, Bloksgaard 2011, p. 38).

Despite pragmatic attitudes towards an earmarked leave model, a study by The Danish Institute for Human Rights (Steffensen, Laursen & Zuleta 2020) depicts a prevalent skepticism about state interference in the distribution of parental leave. Instead, the majority appears to think that families themselves can best assess how they should divide the leave given their particular situation (Steffensen, Laursen & Zuleta 2020, p. 37). Furthermore, this has to do with how the distribution of parental leave depends on what is considered best for the family and child (concerning care, breastfeeding, personal preferences, etc.) (Steffensen, Laursen & Zuleta 2020, p. 22). Thus, albeit various structural frameworks form the distribution of parental leave, it is perceived as a private matter. In short, Danish parents appreciate the freedom to decide for themselves (Steffensen, Laursen & Zuleta 2020, p. 40). However, even though parents are generally skeptical about the state intervening in the distribution of parental leave, the same study found that 8 out of 10 fathers would have used the earmarked paternity leave if it had been possible at that time (Steffensen, Laursen & Zuleta 2020, p. 36). Slightly fewer mothers believe their partner would have taken two months’ earmarked leave. Overall, more fathers than mothers have a positive attitude towards earmarking as the latter are slightly more ambivalent. This could be explained by the norm that parental leave first and foremost falls to the mother and by the fear that parts of the leave could be taken from them (*ibid.*). Furthermore, there is a particular concern among the female respondents that earmarked paternity leave will result in a shorter parental leave period, as they expect that some fathers will not take advantage of the scheme (Steffensen, Laursen & Zuleta 2020, p. 39).

By conducting interviews with new, first-time parents about their distribution of leave and their attitudes towards the EU directive that makes earmarked paternity leave a reality in Denmark by 2022, this thesis builds on the aforementioned studies. Since the directive on earmarked paternity leave has not yet been implemented in Denmark, studies on the attitudes towards the directive are few, and thus, this thesis will contribute to filling this current research gap.

3. EPISTEMOLOGY AND METHOD

The following section starts by explaining the theory of science used in this thesis. The epistemological standpoint constitutes the framework for the choice of method for collecting and processing data, the choice of theory, the analysis, and the possibility of concluding on this basis. Thus, the following section intends to create transparency about the perception and recognition of the reality that sets the direction for the knowledge production of the thesis. Furthermore, the section describes and accounts for the relevance of the method used for collecting the empirical data for the thesis.

3.1 Epistemological position: Social constructivism and post-structuralism

As evident from the introduction, there is an imbalance between men and women in terms of who takes up most of the parental leave. In Denmark today, women averagely take up 90% of the leave, while men take up 10%. Thus, there seems to be an apparent truism connected to being a woman and taking parental leave, which I am critical of in this thesis. The theory of science perspectives that can be used to scrutinize the theme of earmarked paternity leave from this starting point is social constructivism and its related position post-structuralism.

Social constructivists are similar to any school of thought within the social sciences, critical of knowledge taken for granted as “truths”. Accordingly, they believe that the world and realizations of this are constructions consistently created within social contexts. From a social constructivist point of view, the aim is thus to deconstruct the understandings that are perceived as “truthful” and “natural” by examining the discourses that create these “truths” about reality (Juul & Bransholm Pedersen 2012, p. 406). In relation hereto, a post-structuralist standpoint – which puts significantly more emphasis on meaning as a linguistic-discursive phenomenon (Wæver 2012, p. 298) – can be used to examine how the social inscribes itself on the individual and how agency is not only contingent on the discourses at play, but that the particular ways of being based on the discourses are taken up as our own (Davies & Ganon 2005, p. 312). For this thesis, a social constructivist and post-structuralist epistemology is a useful starting point, as it makes it possible to go into depth with the discourses that partly create the framework for the distribution of parental leave between new parents and their attitudes towards earmarked paternity leave. The aim is thus, first of all, to deconstruct the prevailing “truths” related to parental leave praxes and being a man/woman, and secondly, to examine how these discourses affect individuals to the extent that they conform to them. In this

context, the thesis will examine how these discourses emerge in the interviews with new parents who are currently or have recently been on parental leave, and by that, examine what consequences the discourses have in terms of how they relate to earmarked paternity leave. Thus, by reviewing descriptions of gendered ways of being concerning parental leave praxes and parenthood, the aim of this social constructivist/post-structuralist analysis is not to reveal “a hidden truth” of gender, but rather to disclose how meaning is ascribed to gender, how it is performed within a particular context and further, “to trouble that which is taken as stable/unquestionable truth” (Davies & Ganon 2005, pp. 313-314). I now turn to the methodology applied in the thesis.

3.2 Research design and data collection

The empirical basis for this thesis consists of nine interviews with three Danish couples who are new, first-time parents, and where one of them is currently on parental leave or recently has been. Each couple was interviewed together and separately. As the purpose of the thesis is to examine new parents’ thoughts and attitudes towards earmarked paternity leave, a qualitative approach was deemed appropriate, as it provides unique access to people who, in their own words, describe their experiences and opinions. Therefore, it is more likely to generate a fairer and fuller representation of the informants’ perspectives (Brinkmann & Kvale 2018, p. 10; Mason 2012, p. 66). Moreover, as interviews can capture the complexities of people’s experiences and attitudes and emphasize depth and nuance, it seemed appropriate to apply this method when examining a complex issue such as earmarked paternity leave (Brinkmann & Kvale 2018, p. 8; Mason 2012, p. 65). Further, my epistemological position suggests that knowledge is constructed rather than straightforwardly excavated, which is usually the model qualitative interviewing operates with (Mason 2012, p. 68).

The interviews conducted for this thesis are semi-structured, which is defined as having “(...) the purpose of obtaining descriptions of the life world of the interviewee to interpret the meaning of the described phenomena” (Brinkmann 2013, p. 21). The interviews were based on interview guides designed beforehand – one for the interview with the parents together, one for the interviews with the mother, and one for the interviews with the father (see Appendix A). The interview guides were divided into several themes that created an overall framework for the interviews. The themes for the interviews with both parents were: 1) *Distribution of parental leave*, 2) *Gender roles in relation to housework/parenthood/parental leave*, and the key theme related to the main research question; 3) *Attitudes towards earmarked paternity*

leave. In the solo interviews with the mother and father, respectively, they were asked about their job situation and parental leave rights, which gender roles, norms, and expectations they see/have for a mother and father, respectively, how they relate to maternity and paternity leave, respectively, and finally, their attitudes on earmarked paternity leave. Relevant questions were formulated for each theme and the research question it was meant to address. In this context, emphasis has been on formulating open-ended questions that allowed for the primacy of the informants' descriptions and understandings.

Moreover, the semi-structured format of the interview allowed for unexpected themes to come up throughout the interviews and provided more leeway to follow up on the angles deemed important by the informants (Mason 2012, p. 62; Brinkmann 2013, p. 21). Accordingly, I aimed to create a structure that allowed my informants to talk more freely about their perceptions on aspects of parental leave and earmarked paternity leave to give space for unforeseen and new perspectives while simultaneously having the opportunity to focus the conversation on the topics I found essential given the overall aim of the thesis (Brinkmann 2013, p. 21). In all of the interviews, the structure more or less followed the interview guide, and no revisions of the interview guide were made along the way. However, there were cases where the interview took a "detour" from the structure due to new perspectives that the informants brought up. The interviews were conducted in Danish. A copy of the interview guides translated to English can be found in Appendix A⁶.

At the time of the interviews (all conducted in September 2020), the COVID-19 pandemic was more or less under control in Denmark, and the restrictions were few at the time. It was, therefore, possible to conduct the interviews face-to-face. In terms of location for the interviews, they were conducted in the informants' homes since it would make it least arduous for them to participate, especially considering that they are parents with small children, making it a logistical challenge arranging an alternative location. At the same time, I expected that being interviewed within a familiar setting would provide a safer space for the informants, making it easier to build trustful relationships between me as the interviewer and them as informants (Brinkmann & Kvale 2018, p. 10). Luckily, this turned out to be the case, as I

⁶ As the interviews were conducted in Danish, all quotes in the analysis have been translated into English. Translations have been done with care in order not to lose the meaning of the informants' statements.

managed to gain the trust of all the informants, expressed in their willingness to speak openly about the topic, and share their thoughts and ambivalences.

I chose to interview the couples together since I wanted them to reflect on their parental leave praxes together, as it was a joint decision how they ended up distributing the leave between them. Further, I was interested in how they made sense of their gender praxes by engaging with their partner in the interview. However, due to an expectation that it would undoubtedly create a significant bias to interview couples together, I found it relevant to interview them separately as well and give them the chance to speak their mind without worrying how their answer would be received by their partner. The influence of the internal dynamics within the couples turned out to be a relevant factor to compensate for by conducting interviews with them separately as well, as different perspectives and nuances from the informants came forward in the joint and solo interviews, respectively – both in terms of their roles within parenthood, choices related to their distribution of parental leave and their attitudes towards earmarked paternity leave⁷.

Further, what became clear throughout the interviews was that the informants sometimes changed their attitudes and arguments over the course of the interviews. Here, they discovered new aspects and became aware of dynamics and views that they had not been aware of earlier. Thus, the questioning instigated processes of reflection for all informants. Therefore, it becomes evident that the interviews were “a learning process”, as Brinkmann calls it – for both the informants and me as the interviewer (Brinkmann & Kvale 2018, p. 17).

When conducting interviews, ethical issues are inevitable, and thus, I have considered the ethical concerns throughout the entire research process (Brinkmann & Kvale 2018, p. 29). For this reason, at the beginning of each interview, the participants were informed of the study’s overall purpose and gave consent to their participation. They also consented that the interviews were recorded, and I emphasized that the recordings were solely for the purpose of transcribing the interviews and that they would not be shared with anyone. Further, it was made clear that the informants would be secured anonymity and confidentiality (Brinkmann & Kvale 2018, p.

⁷ An example of this was seen in an interview with one of the female informants when discussing expectations of parenthood. Here, she admits that she thinks her partner has not been adequately prepared for parenthood, which was clear that she would not have said had the partner been in the room: “He is doing really well, I’m not saying otherwise, but there are situations where I’m thinking: ”There you could have been better prepared” (...) [Partner] has not prepared at all!”

33). Therefore, the informants (and their children) are assigned fictional names, and all private data (e.g., workplaces or locations) that can identify them have been deleted or anonymized.

3.3 Sampling

In choosing which informants to include in this thesis, the concern was to identify parents who had the experiences and perspectives that the research question required to investigate. In other words, the point was to find the best “data sources”, as Mason terms it (2012, p. 129). For the sampling of informants, the main criterium was that it should be new, first-time parents, in which one or both were currently or had recently been on parental leave. In addition, the experience of being on parental leave needed to be present since I was interested in their thoughts about their leave praxes and the repercussions earmarked paternity leave would have had for them in their current/recent situation. Further, it was vital that it was first-time parents since I wanted their experience with the distribution of parental leave to be new. I made use of the snowball sampling strategy, as my first two informants (found within my network) provided me access to the others.

In terms of the number of informants, I started by interviewing three couples and expected to interview more couples; however, during the last interviews, I found that the content and arguments began to resemble that of the former interviews and that the same themes and points kept recurring in the interviews, what in the literature sometimes is referred to as reaching the point of “saturation” (Mason 2012, pp. 134-135). Further, it turned out that the insights I got from the nine interviews were sufficient to address the research questions in the analysis (Brinkmann 2013, p. 58; Mason 2012, p. 134). A presentation of the informants follows in the table below.

3.4 Presentation of informants

	Name (age)	Profession	Parental leave	Child (age)
Couple 1	Theresa (28)	Teacher, working at a school for children with special needs	16 months	Alma (18 months)
	Theo (33)	Operations engineer, working in a large private company	None	
Couple 2	Sarah (28)	Social worker, unemployed	11 months	Betty (8 months)
	Alexander (30)	Engineer, working in a large private company	None (however, home on sick leave for the first three months)	
Couple 3	Sally (29)	Social educator, working at a school for children with special needs	11 months	Alfred (9 months)
	Martin (28)	Office worker, unemployed	None (however, home for the first nine months due to unemployment)	

Table 2. *Presentation of the informants.*

From a review of the methodological considerations and choices, I now turn to the theoretical perspectives of the thesis.

4. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

This section introduces the theoretical concepts that will be used to understand the empirical material in the analysis. The theoretical basis for the thesis consists of two sociological theories: Judith Butler’s theory on gender performativity and Pierre Bourdieu’s theory on masculine domination as a form of symbolic violence. As I subscribe to a social constructivist and post-structuralist epistemology, my starting point is the discursive, which I use to examine how gender roles within parenthood and perceptions of parental leave practices are constructed among new, first-time parents. Therefore, Butler’s theory is used to explore how gender identities arise on the basis of performativity in opposition to the traditional perception in which a linear relationship between gender and sex is an implicit assumption. Thus, in this context,

Butler is useful to grasp how the idea of gender as a biological naturalness can be deconstructed. Bourdieu is defined as a structuralist constructivist. Therefore, he believes that there is a social genesis of a part of the social structures, while simultaneously objective structures, independent of the consciousness and will of agents (Flecha, Gómez & Puigvert 2001, p. 36). Bourdieu does not focus on the deconstruction of gender, as Butler does, but rather on how one gender dominates the other. This way, in an interrelation, the theories of Butler and Bourdieu can provide an understanding of how gender is constructed and, at the same time, is created by a contradictory relationship. Thus, both theories provide a perspective on how gender identities are constructed, established, maintained whilst at the same time changeable. The theories were chosen prior to the data collection process, and thus, they formed the perspectives I focused on in the interviews.

4.1 Judith Butler

4.1.1 Gender performativity

In her book *Gender Trouble* from 1990, Judith Butler unfolds her theory on gender performativity from a post-structuralist standpoint. Here, she argues against the presumption that there exist fixed gender categories and a binary gender system (Butler 2007, p. 9; 30). Instead, it is Butler's point that gender is performative, brought to existence through repetitive actions and inherited discourses: "In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed", she writes (Butler 2007, p. 34). Thus, according to Butler, there is no such thing as a "woman" or "man" prior to being socially constructed as such. Since gender is a construct independent of sex, her argument is that: "*man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one" (Butler 2007, p. 9).

In 1949 the pioneering French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir famously phrased, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman". In terms of de Beauvoir's claim that one is not born, but rather *becomes* a woman, Butler agrees only by the premise that gender is not pre-discursive, i.e., only if "woman" in this case is not a fixed category, but a construction with no origin or ending – a continuing discursive practice constituted by "incessant and repeated action" (2007, p. 45; 152). Hence, Butler accepts Beauvoir's standpoint, since the "one" who is becoming a woman is not necessarily female. This is where it is clear that Butler belongs within post-structuralism – in arguing that sex, like gender, is a social construct, constituted by

performance: "(...) there is no recourse to a body that has not always already been interpreted by cultural meanings; hence, sex could not qualify as a pre-discursive anatomical facticity. Indeed, sex, by definition, will be shown to have been gender all along" (2007, p. 11). According to Butler, the body is regulated to adopt an expression that fits the gender norm. She argues that the regulation of the body occurs when individuals (directly or indirectly) are encouraged to act in certain ways – often through discourses. In this context, a discourse could be when one talks about how a woman should behave or how a man ought to look. The body is regulated over time through gendered processes, in which bodily actions construct the idea of a certain identity.

Butler points out how we are socialized into the gender categories from birth. As such, there is a constant discursive gendering process going on. The discourses that create gender are placed as "layers" within the individual. These gradually stiffens the gendered expression and are experienced as natural by the individual and the surroundings, and in this process, the gender norm is embedded in the body. Butler claims that discourses give meaning to all aspects of life, including what we perceive to be "feminine" and "masculine" and what society considers to be normal, acceptable, and desirable (Blaise & Taylor 2012, p. 90). Accordingly, discourses on gender create a particular understanding of society and identity, which affects the way humans think and act. Butler argues that how we act, our gestures, our articulated and enacted desires create the illusion that we have an internal "gender core", and if the "cause" of gestures, actions, and desires can be identified within the "self" of the actor, as she writes, "then political regulations and disciplinary practices, which produce the ostensibly coherent gender are effectively displaced from view" (2007, pp. 185-186). Thus, according to Butler, gender is not a stable identity from which certain acts follow, but rather a constructed identity, which the actor performs and comes to believe (2007, pp. 191-192).

Butler uses the metaphor of a drag in her argument that gender is a performance. By imitating gender, the drag tacitly divulges the very imitative structure of gender. As such, there is no original to be imitated – rather, the parody, in fact, *is* the original (Butler 2007, pp. 187-188). Through the metaphor of the drag, Butler argues that what is seen as the "naturalized" knowledge of gender is rather "a changeable and revisable reality" (2007, p. xxiv⁸). Thus, she

⁸ The roman numerals refer to the foreword from 1999 in the beginning of *Gender Trouble* (Butler 2007).

argues that there is neither a true nor original gender identity, cf. her claim that gender is entirely performative – “an imitation without an origin”, as she writes (Butler 2007, p. 188).

Butler essentially problematizes the traditional perception of gender, where men and women are two opposing categories determined by their allegedly biological differences. She, therefore, questions the gender division we have today, in which the gender system is divided by binary opposites like 'man' and 'woman', 'masculine' and 'feminine', as you become a gender only by not being the other gender. This, she argues, wrongfully restricts gender to solely exist within this binary frame (Butler 2007, p. 30). Consequently, it is fundamentally Butler's mission to make “gender trouble” (hence, the title of her magnum opus) by subverting the naturalized notions of gender, which in her words supports masculine hegemony and heterosexist power (2007, p. 46).

4.1.2 The heterosexual matrix

Butler uses the term 'heterosexual matrix' to describe how bodies, gender, and desires are naturalized. By using this term, Butler opposes the heterosexual norm in society since she argues that this norm reproduces the construction of gender within a binary frame that is “hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality” (2007, p. 208). Within the heterosexual matrix, the individual is forced to live within constructed categories of gender (man/woman) and is understood from this framework. Therefore, it is crucial that the individual coherently acts and desires by its gender, i.e., that coherence is maintained among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire to be an “intelligible” gender and accepted in the matrix (Butler 2007, pp. 23-24). The heterosexual matrix, therefore, becomes the definition of what is socially acceptable, and thus, if individuals do not uphold coherence between sex, gender, and desire, they will appear as a failure (ibid.).

4.2 Pierre Bourdieu

4.2.1 The Masculine domination – objectified and embodied division of male and female

In his work *La domination masculine* (English title: *Masculine domination*) from 1998, the French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, performs an analysis of gender divisions in Kabyle society by which he discloses the masculine domination that (in one form or another) prevails in Western societies as a paradigmatic form of symbolic violence.

According to Bourdieu, the division between men and women exists in both an objectified state and in an embodied state in the habitus⁹ of the agents, “functioning as systems of schemes of perception, thought and action” (Bourdieu 2001, p. 8). Referring to Husserl, Bourdieu describes how the concordance between the objective and cognitive structures produces a ‘doxic experience’, which “(...) apprehends the social world and its arbitrary divisions, starting with the socially constructed division between the sexes, as natural, self-evident, and as such contains a full recognition of legitimacy” (2001, p. 9). Thus, gender practices (how we behave as men and women, respectively) follow schemes of dispositions embedded in individuals’ habitus. With this, arbitrary social characteristics classified as either male or female are naturalized (Bourdieu 2001, p. 8). Consequently, biological and anatomical differences between males and females appear as a justification of the socially constructed differences between the genders – and the social division of labor in particular (Bourdieu 2001, p. 11). However, it is not merely social differences between males and females, which are socially constructed. Bourdieu argues that anatomical differences are also subject to a social construction process, as their meaning is enlarged and augmented by the socially constructed differences, which creates a relationship of circular causality between the social and biological components that constantly affirm itself by referring to each other (2001, pp. 11-12; 22-23; Olsen 2002, p. 45). Throughout its existence, the individual is spurred on the appropriate practices to his or her sex. In contrast, inappropriate behavior in relation to the opposite sex, for example, is discouraged or, in a more extreme matter – forbidden. Thus, any feminine part of the masculine is denied (Bourdieu 2001, pp. 25-26).

4.2.2 The androcentric social order

Besides a division of numerous arbitrary characteristics into ‘male’ and ‘female’, an order is incorporated, where men and women are constructed as two hierarchized social essences (Bourdieu 2001, p. 23). Bourdieu designates this order as androcentric, as it hierarchizes male over female, and thus, in his own words, the social order has a tendency to “ratify the masculine

⁹ Habitus is a central term in Bourdieu’s theoretical apparatus. Habitus is constitutive by the experiences we carry with us in the form of a practical reason for how we should act in a given situation (Olsen 2002, p. 45). Past experiences are thus “*deposited in each organism in form of schemes of perception, thought and action (...) more reliably than all formal rules and explicit norms*” (Bourdieu 1990, p. 54).

domination on which it is founded” (2001, p. 9)¹⁰. Among other things, this goes for the sexual division of labor and “a very strict distribution of activities assigned to each sex (...)” (ibid.). As Bourdieu furthermore states: “It is an arbitrary construction of the male and female body, of its uses and functions, especially in biological reproduction, which gives an apparently natural foundation to the androcentric view of the division of sexual labor and the sexual division of labor and so of the whole cosmos” (2001, p. 23). Thus, the masculine sociodicy¹¹ successfully combines two maneuvers: it legitimizes a relationship of domination by embedding it in a biological nature, which is a naturalized social construction itself (ibid.). The precedence of men is asserted in the schemes mentioned earlier, which are defining thoughts and actions of individuals, constitutive of their habitus. When a particular order structures society, the dispositions incorporated within the bodies become a reflection of this order, and albeit humans *can* act differently than what is spurred on by the presiding order, its dispositions will most often be in consistency with it (Bourdieu 2001, pp. 36-37). Bourdieu argues that masculine domination and vision are predominantly reproduced within the family since this is where the “early experience of the sexual division of labor and the legitimate representation of that division, guaranteed by law and inscribed in language, imposes itself” (2001, p. 85). From this, there arises a naturalness in the fact that women, more so than men, handle the “soft” tasks in the home (housework, childcare, etc.) since these activities are connected to care, which again is mainly associated with the feminine.

4.2.3 Symbolic violence

As the structures of domination are deeply embedded in the bodily incorporated dispositions through habitus (and therefore “not readily accessible to consciousness”), both men and women are unaware of these, and they thus come to appear as normal – even natural (Bourdieu 2001, p. 31; 35; 95). Therefore, through an embodiment of the power relations that exist between men and women, thoughts and perceptions of the dominated (women) are structured in compliance with the structures of the relation of domination imposed on them. According to Bourdieu, this means that “acts of cognition” are de facto “acts of recognition” – what he terms as a ‘doxic acceptance’ (2001, p. 13). With this, Bourdieu illustrates how the dominated

¹⁰ Albeit Bourdieu presents this as the dominance of men over women, a differentiation within each gender can also occur, for example in relation to honor or a “manliness that must be validated by other men” (Bourdieu 2001, p. 52).

¹¹ ‘Sociodicy’ refers to the justification of the nature of a society, which is accepted by the dominated group (Bourdieu 2001, p. 23).

unconsciously accept and reproduce the unconscious schemes for action and thinking, which is constitutive of the symbolic violence they face, and how they thereby contribute to their own domination (2001, p. 69). Therefore, symbolic violence can only be exercised by the contribution of those who undergo it (Bourdieu 2001, p. 40). By the term ‘symbolic violence’, Bourdieu refers to how a dominant group and its perception of reality are made the objective reality (1996, p. 40). He describes symbolic violence as “a form of power that is exerted on bodies directly and as if by magic (...) [that] works only on the basis of the dispositions deposited, like springs, at the deepest level of the body” (Bourdieu 2001, p. 38). Accordingly, as the schemes of thought and action precede conscious decisions and control the will, what does it take to phase out masculine dominance? Unlike Marxists, Bourdieu points out how it is illusive to think that it is possible to overcome symbolic violence by consciousness and will alone since its effect is deeply embedded in the body in the form of dispositions (2001, p. 39). Thus, despite acknowledging the persisting gender inequality in society today, Bourdieu would argue that masculine dominance is still prevailing. However, he argues that the main change is that it is no longer imposed as a truism (2001, p. 88).

The theoretical perspectives accounted for above will be used in continuous interaction with my empirical data in the analysis to which I now turn.

5. ANALYSIS

Based on nine interviews with three sets of new, first-time parents, the analysis is divided into three themes corresponding to my thesis statement and research questions. The starting point of the analysis will be how the parents overall relate to their allocation of roles within parenthood and how this is in line with current ideals related to mother- and fatherhood. The second part of the analysis deals with values and priorities related to parental leave. Here, I will examine how this group of new, first-time parents has chosen to distribute their parental leave and which factors they consider to lie behind this distribution. Lastly, the analysis will focus on the parents’ attitudes towards the EU directive on earmarked paternity leave. This part is divided into four subthemes to get around the many aspects related to earmarking. It is important to stress that as my thesis statement and research questions are closely connected, the sections of the analysis partly overlap in terms of themes.

5.1 Gender roles within parenthood

Among the new parents I have interviewed for this thesis, there is an agreement that both parents actively participate in parenthood – they both to some extent partake in raising their child, and they are both to some extent responsible for chores and housework. This reflects an overall breach of traditional gender roles in parenthood, according to which it has been the mother who was the primary caretaker and homemaker. According to the Danish gender researcher Kenneth Reinicke (2013), men’s increasing participation in the home has led to a significant increase in gender equality. Additionally, men have developed a closer bond with their families with the result that the father is now a more present figure in their children’s lives. This indicates that a more equalized parenthood has developed in the last few decades, where the ideal of a caring and active father has become predominant. All in all, this legitimizes that men today can be emotionally involved with their children without being considered as less masculine (Reinicke 2013, p. 103). An example of this appears in the interview with Theo and Theresa when it is mentioned how Theo puts their daughter to bed every night, suggesting that Theo lives up to the ideal of being a caring and active father:

Theresa: *Theo puts her to bed and has done so since she was 8-9 months or so. EVERY night. It is only Theo. I can hardly do it (...)*

Theo: *And that might be a thing that is not practiced that much by others*

Interviewer: *So, you are saying that it might be unusual?*

Theo: *Yes, maybe (...)*

Theresa: *That way, I think, we both contribute with equal amounts of care.*

Similar to Theo, Martin represents the modern ideal of fatherhood, which Reinicke discusses: a caring and emotionally involved father. Concerning this point, Sally says:

Sally: *Our child does not cry a lot, but I think we are actually the reverse of the stereotype, as it is often Martin who consoles him.*

When Sally mentions that they are “the reverse of the stereotype”, because Martin often consoles their son, and Theo reasons that it might not be typical for the father to put the child to sleep every night as he does, it indicates that Martin and Theo’s praxes disrupt gender norms within parenthood. According to Butler (2007), these gender norms are created through what she terms the heterosexual matrix as “guidelines” for what is perceived as legitimate and

coherent gender performances. As stated in the theory section, it is essentially Butler's claim that gender is a social construct, which is brought into existence by repetitive actions and discourses (2007, p. 34). Butler, therefore, argues that gender is not a pre-discursive phenomenon, i.e., that there is no gender identity prior to discourse. Thus, a stereotype like the one Sally talks about only exists because gender discourses have "naturalized" particular ways to behave as man and woman. According to Butler, it is therefore pointless to talk about gender stereotypes since they are, in fact, social constructions – i.e., what is considered "masculine" might as well signify a female body and vice versa (2007, p. 9). Thus, the fact that my male informants take on the role of the caring and active father can be seen as a breach of the regulating practices that presuppose a binary relationship, in which masculine praxes differ from the feminine with the result that gender norms become more blurred.

However, albeit the parents to a large extent have divided the housework and childcare between them, and thus, perceive themselves as equal in their parenthood, it nevertheless becomes clear throughout the interviews that the female informants overall take on the largest responsibility in the family:

Sally: *I am the one who does the grocery shopping and makes sure we have the things he [their son] needs and will be needing soon (...) I think that is very stereotypical. I am also the one who cares for him: Brushes his teeth, cut his nails, shower with him (...) If it starts snowing today, Martin will buy the snowsuit tomorrow, whereas I bought it a month ago.*

In a similar vein, Theresa talks about a 'mental load', which women often have, referring to the responsibility they often take to plan and remember everything that needs to be fixed and bought. Theresa and Theo have actively worked with this in their partnership, thus getting Theo to take off some of Theresa's "load":

Theresa: *Such things as planning ahead: "When is she going to get vaccinated?" and stuff like this, which is very much something women think about (...) I had everything in my head concerning both our car, baby, and house. So, we worked on this, and it is better now, I think (...) We have become more equalized in terms of these things.*

However, Theresa takes care of most of the practical things related to their daughter:

Theresa: *I shop for clothes and snacks for her, I know where she is in her development and what toys would be suitable for her (...) Concerning the child, it is distributed rather- I think, I would say gender stereotypical.*

Similar to Sally, Theresa uses the phrase “gender stereotypical” indicating the seemingly “naturalized” knowledge of gender that Butler opposes – in this case, characteristics that are accepted as typically feminine (shopping for clothes, toys, etc.). It is evident that Theresa considers her praxis as being connected to the female gender, that it is in line with the gender identity she identifies with and can therefore be considered “normal” (termed here as “stereotypical”). Related hereto, Sarah talks about her and Alexander being “traditional” in terms of their gender roles, which indicates that certain praxes are perceived as being tied to a specific gender:

Sarah: *We are definitely in the traditional end of the spectrum, I would say (...) I am sleeping in bed with her [their daughter]. I stay at home with her, I take care of most meals with her, I do the grocery shopping. You clean the kitchen and tidy up (...) You go to work.*

Alexander: *Yes, it is probably in the traditional end.*

Although the female informants seem to take on more responsibility in the family overall, and that it is furthermore evident from the interviews that complete dissolution of traditional gender roles within parenthood is yet to be fully achieved, the women cannot be characterized as the *primary* caretakers. Rather, it is clear that the male informants also partake in the household chores and childcare, and when Theresa says, “we have become more equalized”, it testifies that the discourse is changing. This indicates that a more equalized parenthood has developed and that the ideal of the caring father is gaining acceptance, as pointed out by Reinicke (2013). This new discourse makes it more legitimate for fathers like Theo, Martin, and Alexander to be more involved in the home, which emphasizes Butler’s point that what is seen as a “naturalized” knowledge of gender rather is “changeable and revisable”, as she puts it (Butler 2007, p. xxiv).

5.2 Distribution of parental leave – gender praxis and determining factors

However, the traditional allocation of gender roles remains highly visible among the parents in terms of their distribution of parental leave. While Theo had two earmarked weeks of parental leave right after their daughter was born, Theresa stayed at home for almost a year and a half. Initially, Sarah and Alexander had decided that Sarah would take most of the leave and that Alexander would have two months in the end. However, as Alexander was on sick leave during the first months of their daughter's life, he ended up giving up his part of the leave, and thus, Sarah took the whole leave period herself. For Sally and Martin, the situation was different. Long before they became parents, they had talked about wanting to split the leave more equally between them – ideally, six months each, but at least three months for Martin. However, as Martin was unemployed, when Sally was pregnant, they decided to give Sally the whole leave period.

Thus, all three couples have distributed their parental leave in a traditional manner: albeit for different reasons, the women have ended up taking the whole leave period, while the men have had the two weeks, which are earmarked for them following the birth. The informants' leave practices are thus reflective of an existing gender norm that women take up most of the leave period. This is in line with previous research confirming that parental leave is still primarily perceived as something “women take” (Bloksgaard 2011, p. 7; Jul Jacobsen, Heegaard Klyngne & Holt 2013, p. 15; Steffensen, Laursen & Zuleta 2020, p. 22). Using Butler's theory on gender performativity, this presumption is connected to the ongoing discursive gendering process embedded within social practices, which “naturalizes” specific characteristics as either “female” or “male”. In this case, the woman is perceived as the more “natural” caretaker. Since the woman goes through pregnancy, gives birth, and (a majority) breastfeed their child, it can seem most rational that she takes the biggest part of the parental leave. From the perspective of Bourdieu, one can say that the informants, throughout their existence, are spurred on the proper behavior related to their gender (2001, p. 25). As they early on experience the sexual division of labor, this creates a naturalness in the fact that women are assigned to activities connected to “soft tasks” like child care – something which is beyond their consciousness, since the structures of domination are deeply embedded within them as dispositions (Bourdieu 2001, p. 85). Thus, it appears natural that the mother is taking most of the parental leave. The fact that there continues to be gendered expectations and ideas about “proper” ways to act in relation to parental leave is confirmed in the studies by Bloksgaard (2011), Steffensen, Laursen & Zuleta (2020), Deding (2010), and Olsen (2002) referred to earlier. These studies conclude that

the distribution of parental leave continues to be highly influenced by traditional conceptions about work, parenthood, and gender, including the persistent stereotype that the mother is the natural caretaker, which also seems to be at stake for the parents in this thesis (Bloksgaard 2011, p. 7; Steffensen, Laursen & Zuleta 2020, p. 22; Deding 2010, p. 109; Olsen 2002, p. 50).

Yet, what determines how new parents distribute their parental leave is a more complex matter than traditional gender roles and gendered expectations, which is also evident from previous research. Factors such as economy and work situation play an essential role, which is visible in the interviews when I ask them why they have distributed their leave the way they have. Theo and Theresa describe the following considerations regarding their distribution of leave:

Theresa: *It depended on several things. It had to do with Theo's job situation being insecure at the time (...) To be sure that he was in a good position to take a new job and not say right away: "I need three months of paternity leave", it was easier that I took it all to start with, and then if he wanted it, we could change it later (...).*

Part of the reason that Theo did not take any paternity leave was his uncertain job situation. Therefore, they did not question that Theresa was going to stay home for the entire period, as it made sense for his career. As Theresa says, Theo needed to be "in a good position" to take a new job, and if he had to ask for paternity leave immediately, it would have put him in a more vulnerable position. For Martin and Sally, the situation was similar. Martin was unemployed during Sally's pregnancy, and they, therefore, decided Sally should take the whole leave period, as it would have made it more difficult for Martin to get a new job if he had to ask for paternity leave:

Sally: *Let's say that Martin found a job when our son was two months old. Then he had to say: "Well, in four months, I am taking paternity leave". We talked about the fact that it probably wouldn't be easy to get a job and come and say that right away.*

This confirms what is seen in previous studies that the work situation is one of the primary determining factors behind the distribution of leave between parents (Olsen 2007:55; Bloksgaard 2011, p. 8; Steffensen, Laursen & Zuleta 2020, pp. 30-31). Like many other men, Theo and Martin seem to have limited options to choose family life over work-life since fatherhood ideals are not yet challenging the gendered work ideals, as Bloksgaard's research suggests (2016, p. 155). Therefore, both Martin and Theo abstain from taking part in the leave,

as they fear it will put them in a bad position to get a job. This is connected to the fact that men, contrary to women, are not automatically entitled to parental leave. Rather, they have to ask for it, which can be difficult in a work-life characterized by flexibility and presence (Bloksgaard 2016, p. 143). As Bloksgaard argues, this places fathers like Alexander, Theo, and Martin in a disadvantageous position in relation to parental leave rights compared to women (2009, pp. 229-230). In fact, the contrast to the female informants became evident when I asked the mothers if they had any concerns about asking their employer for maternity leave. As it turns out, neither of them experienced any negative feelings from their workplace:

Theresa: *I just told them: “This is what I want”, and no questions were asked.*

Sally: *When I told my boss, he just said: “Wow, congratulations!”. So, there were no hard feelings about me needing maternity leave. He said: “We just do it the way you want”.*

Sarah: *It was great to know that they personally were happy for me.*

This is similar to the conclusions of previous research – that while both men and women, in theory, are “free” to take parental leave, the reality in terms of concrete options for doing so is different. Women are still seen as the natural caretakers, and men continue to have limited options in choosing family obligations over their careers (Bloksgaard 2009, pp. 254-256; Steffensen, Laursen & Zuleta 2020, pp. 30-31; Jul Jacobsen, Heegaard Klynge & Holt 2013, p. 15).

Moreover, all three couples mention economy as a part of the explanation of their distribution. As previous research has indicated, the average income of men is higher than the average income of women, which is suggested to be one of the most common barriers for men in terms of taking a bigger portion of the leave, since the compensation in the form of parental allowance is often much lower than their wages compared to the case of most women (Bloksgaard 2011, p. 19; 37; Deding 2010, p. 110; Jul Jacobsen, Heegaard Klynge & Holt 2013, p. 46; Olsen 2005, p. 113). Thus, it makes more sense for many couples that the father continues to work while the mother stays home and receives parental allowance. This is the case for the informants as well. Since Theo has a higher income than Theresa and they were saving up to buy a house, they were reliable on Theo’s income when their daughter was born. Therefore, they decided to let Theresa take the entire leave period.

Similarly, economy was a vital part of Sally and Martin's planning since Martin was unemployed. Therefore, it made sense for Sally to go on parental leave, as she had the right to six months paid maternity leave. For Sarah and Alexander, economy was not the primary factor behind their leave distribution. Nevertheless, since Sarah's income is substantially lower than Alexander's, they do not hide the fact that their respective incomes played a role:

Alexander: *It was not what determined it [their decision], but it was part of it. It costs me a lot of money to go on leave.*

Sarah: *It was actually because you calculated how much money you would miss out on (...) It was a lot of money!*

Not only does the difference in income levels make it more beneficial for the mother to go on parental leave for longer than the father, so does the difference in parental leave rights. Concerning this point, Theresa states:

Theresa: *In society, there is not much room for men to necessarily go on paternity leave for a long time. They might be allowed to finance it themselves. As I see it, there is not really made room for it just yet – for them to get as much financial support, for example, if that is what they want.*

Since women have 18 weeks of earmarked maternity leave, which is often compensated economically, and men currently have two weeks, it can seem understandable that the couples have distributed the parental leave in this way. This is related to the fact that earmarked leave periods help set a standard for an "appropriate" length of the leave, as Bloksgaard and others have argued (Bloksgaard 2011, p. 38; Jul Jacobsen, Heegaard Klynge & Holt 2013, p. 15). Further, the flexible part of the parental leave of 32 weeks is compensated through parental allowance, which, as demonstrated above, makes it more advantageous for the women to take most of this part, as their income is generally lower than their partners'. Finally, since men do not yet have more than two weeks of earmarked leave, the leave conditions at their workplace often determine the length of their leave. Concerning the two months Alexander was supposed to have, Sarah says:

Sarah: *(...) there are pretty horrible conditions related to paternity leave at Alexander's firm, so it made sense that it should not be more (...) It was not paid; the compensation was a little higher than parental allowance. Therefore, he said: "I will just take the eight weeks then".*

This quote suggests that parental leave rights can be determining for how much leave men end up taking. Alexander was not offered a fully paid leave period, as Sarah had been, but merely an economic compensation for eight weeks. He states that he might have taken a longer leave if he was properly compensated:

Alexander: *I might have taken three months if it was with full salary. It would definitely have made me more inclined to go on leave.*

Overall, this suggests that economy plays an essential role in the distribution of parental leave. Further, it confirms the findings of previous studies, which describe proper wage compensation to be essential for more fathers to take up a longer leave period (Bloksgaard 2011, p. 37; Deding 2010, p. 110; Jul Jacobsen, Heegaard Klynge & Holt 2013, p. 46).

Besides their work situation, economy, and parental leave rights, what has determined the distribution of parental leave for two of the couples is their respective “needs” to stay home with the child. Theo and Theresa, for example, quickly agreed that it was Theresa who was going to stay home with their daughter. In the interview, it became clear that this is primarily because Theresa has had a lifelong dream of becoming a mother and wanted to have as much time with their daughter as possible:

Theo: *It was probably mostly a question of Theresa really wanting to.*

Theresa: *I always dreamed of becoming a mother, and I just need to be with her. And Theo did not feel the same way. He had no need for it to be ALL hours of the day!*

Thus, Theresa’s desire to stay at home with their daughter exceeded Theo’s, and Theo, therefore, decided to opt-out completely:

Theo: *Well, Theresa really wanted it all. And in that sense, she wanted it all more than I wanted some, you could say. That is how much more she wanted it all.*

Theresa reasons that this, among other things, has to do with their different approaches to work-life:

Theresa: *Theo is VERY engaged in his work (...) He wants to pursue a career for some years, whereas I work to be with my child and husband. And it is*

perfectly fine to have a job you like, but it is just not my drive. I just really wanted to be with my child (...).

However, from a sociological viewpoint, with Butler and Bourdieu's theories in mind, it is interesting to look at what might at first hand become viewed as "personal preferences" or "free will" in this context. Butler would argue that this "need" for Theresa to stay home and pursue family life instead of her career is a social construct that merely stems from norms of cultural intelligibility (2007, p. 24). This is related to how enacted desires create an illusion of an "interior and organizing gender core", which localizes the "cause" of desire within the self. Thus, the disciplinary practices that produce the ostensibly coherent gender are "displaced from view", as Butler formulates it (2007, p. 186). Accordingly, what seems merely a question of who *wants* to stay home with the baby is instead a reflection of how discourses regulate individuals to act in certain ways through gendered processes. Bourdieu explains this by the schemes of dispositions embedded in habitus, which instill certain gendered expectations of "correct behavior" in us and concurrently discourage other "inappropriate" practices (2001, p. 8).

It is evident from the above that, since the three couples have chosen to give all the leave to the woman, they all reproduce the traditional gender roles within their parenthood – with the mother as the primary caretaker and the father as the breadwinner. Common for Theo, Theresa, Sarah, and Alexander is that neither of them discussed the distribution in detail nor considered it distributed differently. Instead, it seems that both couples reached a consensus without even discussing it:

Sarah: *It was not even something we talked about, was it?*

Alexander: *No, it just felt completely natural, didn't it? (...)*

What is worth noticing here is the choice of words – "it just felt completely natural", which similarly to the idea of the "free will" can be scrutinized by the use of Butler's theory on gender performativity. According to Butler, nothing is pre-discursive, which is why she points out that certain leave practices can only feel natural because discourses have created that illusion. Her point is that gender discourses determine gender practices. These discourses are layered and embedded within the individual and are then experienced as natural, which can explain why it felt "natural" for Theresa and Sarah to want the entire leave period. Again, according to Bourdieu, this is connected to the schemes of dispositions in habitus from which symbolic

violence is exercised, and gendered expectations arise (ibid.). Related hereto, previous research suggests that gender norms and perceptions prevent fathers from imagining themselves taking paternity leave at the same time as they give rise to a naturalization of mothers' precedence to take care of the baby (Olsen 2002, p. 50). In other words, it is difficult for both parents (and the surrounding society) to imagine the father on paternity leave instead of the mother, as the other scenario is taken for granted. Thus, Olsen argues against the assumption that the leave practices are based on conscious, rational choices, as it is her argument that they are rooted in tacit expectations related to gender norms (ibid.). Sarah describes such unspoken expectations in relation to parental leave in the following:

Sarah: *Actually, I think there is an expectation that I take up most of the leave. It is not necessarily something anyone has said. It is just a feeling you get.*

Although Sarah wanted to take up a big part of the leave, she feels guilty that Alexander might have wanted more and was afraid to ask for it:

Alexander: *Sarah kept asking if I wanted more, right?*

Sarah: *Yes, that was just very important to me. Plain selfishly, I wanted a lot to myself, I did. But still, it was very important that I felt that Alexander had a choice. That he did not just do it to make me happy and that he did not feel that I pressured him not to take more (...) And I was afraid that I had been a little too clear that I wanted a big part so that he felt: "Well okay, I will just take nine weeks since you want it all".*

It was important to Sarah that she gave Alexander the leave he wanted and that she did not pressure him not to take more than the two months they agreed on (which he then later gave to Sarah). However, it is clear from my interview with Sarah alone that although she principally wanted Alexander to go on leave, she dreamt of staying home for the entire leave:

Interviewer: *So, in principle, he should have paternity leave, but selfishly speaking, you would want it all?*

Sarah: *I must admit that, yes.*

Alexander confirms this in the interview with him alone, where he expresses that it was one of the reasons that he did not end up taking any of the leave:

Alexander: *Sarah really wanted it. She loves staying at home. So, that just ended like that.*

When asked why she thinks Alexander gave up his part of the parental leave, Sarah contemplates that it was due to boredom:

Sarah: *I think he was bored in the end, to be honest.*

Likewise, Theresa does not think Theo would thrive while staying home with their newborn daughter, which emphasizes the preconception that women more so than men enjoy taking care of a baby at this stage:

Theresa: *I think he would be bored to death if he had to stay home when Alma [their daughter] was a newborn.*

The fact that Sarah mentions that Alexander was bored by staying home with their daughter, and Theresa imagines that Theo likewise would be “bored to death” are expressions of the traditional “naturalized” perceptions of gender, which Butler problematizes. In this case that men, by virtue of their gender, will find it boring to stay home with an infant, unlike women who are expected to enjoy it (Butler 2007, p. 191). Bourdieu would explain this by referring to the social constructions of gender that are perceived as self-evident through the embodied state in the schemes immanent in habitus by which possibilities and limitations of gender are determined (2001, p. 8). Thus, according to Bourdieu, it is due to these immanent schemes within their habitus and the symbolic violence it exerts that Sarah and Theresa do not question that men are less likely to enjoy taking care of an infant.

Common for Sarah and Theresa is that they prioritize having a long leave period and creating a family over their career. While Theresa dreams of staying home with her children until they start school, Sarah describes how she used to be career-minded, but that her pregnancy changed her priorities: “It is more important that I have my maternity leave”, she states. Sally differs from Sarah and Theresa in this regard, as she initially could not imagine staying home with her son for an entire year:

Sally: *Many women look forward to going on leave and say: “It’s going to be great to be a mom and go to cafés”, but I have always thought: “Yeah, it will be great, but I really don’t think I can stick it out for an entire year (...) Six months is appropriate, then I have to get to work again”. And actually, I think*

it is a total pity for men that parental leave is the way it is, and I have thought: "My husband should not miss out on that time".

Since Sally wanted Martin to have half of the leave, and Martin wanted this as well, this testifies that they do not adhere to the traditional gender norms to the same extent as the other couples when it comes to parental leave. Initially, Martin wanted Sally to take the entire parental leave but changed his mind along the way. Asking him why he reconsidered, he contemplates:

Martin: *It was because I suddenly started to feel a form of jealousy. I thought: "Well, I want to be at home with him as well, but I can't if she has the whole leave period, so how do we do that?"*

Even though Sally ended up taking the entire leave, it was solely due to Martin not having a job for the first nine months of their son's life. Instead, he was at home with Sally and their son. In that sense, one can argue that they "shared" the parental leave in practice, and thus, Martin did not feel like he missed out on anything:

Martin: *Ideally, Sally wanted me to have part of the leave, and I do feel like I did since I have been at home.*

Interviewer: *And what has it given you to stay at home with Alfred [their son]?*

Martin: *Everything as in EVERYTHING with my son! It has given me an amazing bond with him, which I rarely see between fathers and newborns. I consider that very unique. And I do feel a sense of sorrow that other men do not have the same level of opportunities that I've had.*

According to Reinicke, men's status has often been related to their position on the job market. This means that masculinity has been connected to earning money and being successful. Therefore, when a woman takes up the whole leave period (as Theresa and Sarah, and in practice Sally as well), while the man is providing for the family (as Theo and Alexander), it is a reflection of traditional gender roles. When Theresa expresses her and Theo's priorities in terms of letting him focus on his career, while she wanted as much of the leave as possible, and when Sarah ideally wants all of the parental leave to herself, it can be argued that by doing so, they reproduce and legitimize the gender identities that reflect traditional gender roles of parenthood. From Butler's perspective, you could say that Theo and Alexander perform their gender by focusing on their career and occupying the breadwinner role. Likewise, Theresa and Sarah perform their gender by being the primary caretakers – care being associated with something "soft", which again is associated with femininity. Thus, by living up to criteria

essential to the construction of male and female identity, they each gain recognition based on their gender performances.

The following part of the analysis will focus on the informants' attitudes towards the EU directive on earmarked paternity leave, which from 2022 secures men nine weeks of earmarked leave. In the interviews, it became evident that the question of earmarked leave is a complex matter, which left the informants with arguments both for and against the directive. Although some of the couples are more in favor of earmarked paternity leave than others, it would not do their arguments justice to simply place them in either the "for" or "against" category as if they were unambiguously addressing the matter. For this reason, I have chosen to split this part of the analysis into four subsections, in which the informants' multifaceted arguments are unfolded. Firstly, their thoughts on the current legislation on parental leave are reviewed. In the subsequent two sections, I examine their attitudes about the EU directive on earmarked paternity leave through their arguments for and against, respectively. The final section deals with the paradox of perceived coercion in relation to earmarked paternity leave.

5.3 Attitudes towards earmarked paternity leave

5.3.1 Concerning status quo

Prior to asking the informants about their attitudes towards earmarked paternity leave, I wanted them to relate to the legislation on parental leave that applies today. Here I present them with the current average distribution among Danish couples – that women averagely take up 90% of the leave period, while men are averagely taking 10%. Neither Sally nor Sarah considers this a problem in principle; however, they find it to be a societal problem in terms of gender equality:

Sarah: (...) *women are set so far back. That is a fact. In terms of pension savings and wage increases and career opportunities in general. There it is a problem. And a gigantic one, in fact. I do not think about it as much because I am not career-minded, so, in my little life, it does not matter.*

Sally: *As society and in terms of equality and the fact that children benefit from both parents, I do think it is a problem.*

Further, both Sally and Martin problematize that men miss out on a lot given the status quo in terms of time and connection with the child. Martin argues that the current legislation maintains

men in the role as the breadwinner, and as he has benefitted from staying home with his son, he would want more men to have the same experience:

Martin: *I can do much more with Alfred [their son] than I feel other fathers can do with their children (...) I have seen how valuable it is to have a deep connection with the child.*

Sally follows up on this by lamenting that men are in an inferior position to women in terms of parental leave rights:

Sally: *(...) Emotionally, I think that men miss out on a lot (...) I think that is a pity. I am in a much better position than my husband in terms of everything related to children.*

For Sarah and Alexander status quo is problematic in terms of economy, as fathers seldomly get offered a paid leave period. The fact that Alexander was not offered any particular compensation for the time he would be away from work surprised Sarah and Alexander. This has left them both wondering why there exists such a skewness in the rights to parental leave for men and women:

Sarah: *It is as discriminatory as it can get! It means not recognizing that the father needs paternity leave as well (...).*

Alexander: *I think that that is plain and simple not okay that we are not entitled to full economic compensation. I do not understand why. Of course, it lies in history that the culture was very different once. There was a time when you really could not imagine a man going on paternity leave. Why would he? And that is different now, and legislation should follow.*

Interviewer: *You mean the economic compensation with full salary?*

Alexander: *Yes. The fact that there are 14 weeks with full salary offered for women. That is a fact. That needs to be offered to men as well. That will also make it more legitimate [paternity leave]. The rhetoric of: "Well, you can go on leave, but you will be offered parental allowance..." – it makes you feel like you are a source of inconvenience (...).*

Concerning the different lengths of earmarked leave that women and men are entitled to today, several informants express that the two weeks of earmarked paternity leave after the birth are inadequate. They argue that an extra number of weeks at that time could benefit all parts:

Sarah: *You can't establish a life as a new family in two weeks, you simply can't! (...) A birth is overwhelming for the father too, and it takes time to process, and then boom – you have to go back to work! (...) The father could easily need a minimum of a month to get settled as well.*

It seems that this was the experience the male informants had as well. Theo finds the two weeks he had after the birth of his daughter was not enough for him and Theresa to get settled and feel entirely secure in the new roles as parents:

Theo: *I would say AT LEAST two weeks.*

Interviewer: *Do you think it was too short?*

Theo: *Yes, well, we were at least a little worried about how it was going to go.*

Sally has the same thoughts about this, looking at it from the perspectives of both parents:

Sally: *I must admit that I find it completely senseless and completely torture-like that you have to be alone with an infant (...) You haven't tried it before, you don't know anything, and then you are there all by yourself (...) [and] I think the men who return to work after two weeks, they must be having a hard time!*

Although most of the parents find the skewed distribution problematic on a macro level in terms of gender equality, they all mention breastfeeding as a crucial factor, which complicates an equal distribution between men and women. All informants talk about breastfeeding as something that “naturalizes” that the mother stays home with the child for most of the leave period (and in any case, in the beginning). Thus, notions concerning biology have a significant impact on their thoughts about the distribution of parental leave. No matter how progressive the informants are in terms of how equal the distribution ideally should be, it is evident that breastfeeding makes their considerations more multifaceted, as they acknowledge that this factor naturally places the genders unequally in relation to parental leave:

Theo: *There is a consideration to have in mind that if you want to breastfeed (...), then it is only the woman who can do that after all. So, there will be some time (...) where the woman has to have the breasts nearby, which is translatable to maternity leave, right?*

In relation hereto, Sarah contemplates:

Sarah: *There is one parent who is supposed to take care of the baby at night, and the father cannot breastfeed. In my opinion, it is easier – if the mother is breastfeeding – that the mother has the longest part of the leave in the beginning.*

Thus, in the interviews, the informants ascribe significant meaning to biology in their thoughts about the distribution of parental leave. Further, it is evident in the interviews that the informants equate the child's feeding with the mother, even if the mother is not breastfeeding. An example is seen in the interview with Martin. Here he speaks about how he and Sally both feed their son with infant formula and, therefore, feels like he is “both a mother and a father”:

Martin: *I feel like I am both a mother and a father in the way we have shared things, and I think that is so great!*

Interviewer: *How have you been a “mother”, so to speak?*

Martin: *Well, I feed him every night for dinner, and I have been the one that feeds him when he woke up in the middle of the night (...) I haven't been able to pull out a breast for him, of course, but I have pulled out the bottle instead. So, all of the mother's roles of survival for the child I have had in the nighttime.*

This, again, is an example of how gender is perceived as a stable identity from which certain characteristics or acts follow, as Butler argues – in this instance, how the mother by default is associated with feeding the child. From this, I now turn to the informants' attitudes towards the EU directive on earmarked paternity leave.

5.3.2 Arguments in favor of the directive

Even though far from all of the parents are favorably disposed to the directive, they are all positive in terms of its potential to put focus on paternity leave, and with this, its potential to reduce the current skewed distribution of parental leave. Thus, even the informants who are skeptical towards the intrusive nature of earmarked paternity leave agree that it is necessary to

“start somewhere” and that the directive could be this “somewhere”. “A step in the right direction”, as Theresa formulates it.

Sally and Martin have the most positive attitudes towards earmarked paternity leave. Although they are stunned that there is a need for political intervention to get more men to go on paternity leave, they acknowledge that there is an inherently cultural issue that needs to be altered and that political action is a necessary tool to try to change the norm:

Sally: *It has to come from above, politically, because I really think it lies very deeply in us, biologically, that this is just the way it is – that the mother is there to begin with.*

Martin: *I think it is a great idea! I believe many – both men and women – who are a bit stuck with the idea that it is the woman who takes all the leave (...) This will be an eye-opener. Often it is a rule or law that makes people think: “Oh yeah, it can be like this, too”. If you are in a car, it can be tempting to drive 200 km/h since you might feel a rush doing so. But the signs dictate that you can only drive 110, so that is what we do. [Earmarked paternity leave] is, of course, entirely different, and the first couple of years will probably be weird for many, as you need to get used to something new. But in five years, we will have moved on from there and will see that [earmarked paternity leave] as the norm. Then someone will say: “You know what, when my younger brother was born, my father did not have any paternity leave, can you imagine that?”*

Interviewer: *It will be a new normal?*

Martin: *A new normal, exactly.*

Sally: *In 30 years, it is probably the father who takes all of the parental leave! One step at a time (...).*

From the perspective of Butler, Sally’s statement: “I really think it lies very deeply in us, biologically, that this is just the way it is – that the mother is there to begin with”, is interesting, as Sally puts into words how it is perceived in society as *literary* natural (cf. her choice of phrase: “biologically”) that it is the mother who takes most (if not all) of the leave. This taken-for-granted idea that gender is a fixed category by which there are associated innate characteristics and from which various acts follow is fundamentally what Butler opposes with her theory. Therefore, when it is perceived to be natural that the mother stays at home with the child, Butler would claim that it is solely “a performative accomplishment”, caused by the

gendered discourses that form what is perceived as “normal” in terms of one’s gender performance (2007, p. 92).

Alexander agrees with Martin that the directive will create “a new normal”, which in time will change both how we view parental leave and which expectations we have for a father and mother, respectively. Thus, in the future, Alexander expects that it will be normal that the father takes a bigger part of the parental leave:

Alexander: *Then this directive comes along, and then their parents take parental leave, and they will talk about the time they were on leave, and then it will be like: “My father was on paternity leave, he told me, and we have these pictures hanging on the wall of me on a camping trip with my father when I was six months”. Which do not exist now because we didn’t grow up with that.*

In line with this, Sally anticipates that the earmarked paternity leave will get men, who would otherwise not take any parental leave, to take the nine weeks assigned for them. That way, she argues that the earmarked paternity leave can function as an eye-opener for those who would otherwise be hesitant to take paternity leave:

Sally: *I do think there are many career-oriented men that think: “Oh no, now I have to take those fucking nine weeks because that is what my wife tells me to and it's stupid not to”, but I think when they are done, they will be thinking: “Fuck, how great!”.*

In relation hereto, Martin contemplates how earmarked paternity leave can create a conversation about men’s leave praxes in society and among couples:

Interviewer: *So, it is good to take it in steps?*

Martin: *Exactly. If everyone backs it up from the start and says: “Yes, this is so nice!”, then the conversation starts – should there be more, should the numbers be changed, or is it suitable? (...) You [also] start the conversation at home. You say: “I have nine weeks that I need to take. Should I take more while I am at home anyway?”.*

The argument here is that earmarked paternity leave can be a driving force for gradually changing the norm for how much of the total parental leave men take.

What most of the informants further mention a positive effect of the directive is that earmarked paternity leave will provide women with better conditions in terms of employment. The argument is that a company's economic repercussions of hiring a 29-year-old woman with no children (who, according to the statistics, is likely to be pregnant within a few years) will be significantly less when the parental leave period becomes more equally divided between men and women. Concerning the current conditions, Sally says:

Sally: *Hiring women in their 20's and 30's, many employers probably think: "Oh, then she probably needs a few maternity leaves, then she is gone, and we have to pay money". (...) Many will probably not give them these jobs because then they are gone for a half or a whole year, and they have to pay for it. It is of significance, I imagine.*

Theresa points out that besides paying for their maternity leave, the workplace has to do without the women for a longer time than a man, which can make her job situation even more precarious:

Theresa: *I've heard that there are places where they would hesitate to hire a young woman at the age of 25 compared to one with the same qualifications, who is a man. Exactly because they know that they are most likely going to do without her within the next couple of years.*

Thus, the argument among the informants is that the directive will help to equalize the conditions for men and women in their work-lives:

Theresa: *(...) if you hire a woman of the reproductive age, then you know that you are going to miss out on her for 1-2 years of the time she is there, whereas it for men is like: "Well, it is only two weeks, that is okay!". So, it [the earmarked paternity leave] will open for more equality in that sense. You have to hire both men and women, as they are both gone for a longer period.*

Sarah adds that the directive will also create more equality, as women will earn bigger pension savings when they are not absent from work as long. However, it is not merely women who are expected to gain from the earmarked paternity leave – men are expected to have a lot to win as well. As mentioned earlier, previous research concluded that structural rights in terms of parental leave are of great importance, as these can support both men and women in counteracting the gender norms related to parental leave praxes (Bloksgaard 2009, pp. 254-255; Olsen 2002, p. 50; Steffensen, Laursen & Zuleta 2020, p. 10). These studies point out that

when men do not have legal rights to more than two weeks of paternity leave, it is difficult to ask their employer for more than that. Of this, Sally says:

Sally: *Well yeah, you come and ask for time off without having the right to do so.*

The informants argue that earmarked paternity leave, therefore, will help men who want a bigger part of the leave period but might be hesitant to ask their employer and demand it from their partner. They acknowledge that it can be difficult to ask for paternity leave, as gender norms are tenacious and difficult to challenge, and they, therefore, anticipate that earmarked paternity leave will make it easier to claim parts of the parental leave from their (and their partners') workplace when there is legislation to back it up. Below, Sally points out that the directive will help men, as their employers no longer can deny them paternity leave:

Sally: *They cannot say: "You know what, the firm is not doing so well at the moment, we cannot do without you". There is nothing they can say! The rule is there.*

In relation hereto, Theo mentions that earmarked leave can be a good thing in terms of changing culture in employment, as some companies are not used to dealing with paternity leave. Thus, he calls earmarked paternity leave a "necessary evil" that should be implemented for a number of years to re-think the ideas we have about fathers on leave – to "stir things up", as he formulates it. This is in line with previous research, which argues that support of legislation is important since earmarking will legitimize and normalize paternity leave (Bloksgaard 2011, p. 38; Olsen 2002, p. 50; Jul Jacobsen, Heegaard Klynge & Holt 2013, p. 15; Olsen 2007, p. 9).

Another advantage of earmarked paternity leave that all informants mention is that fathers will get a stronger bond with their children. For Theresa and Theo, it has been clear that the fact that Theresa took up the whole leave period meant that she had been closer with their daughter than Theo was in the beginning. As Theresa argues, there is naturally a bigger attachment to the parent who spends the most time with the child:

Theresa: *(...) she was with me for 16 months, so it wasn't strange that it was me she sought (...).*

For this reason, Theo expresses that he wants to take up paternity leave with their future children:

Theo: *Well, it is probably a question of closeness with Alma [their daughter]. It has improved, but at some point, it felt like being on the sideline. And there would be a lot to retrieve in that regard at the age of 7-8 months already. It would be like getting a head start on the relationship with the child (...) The relationship I have with Alma now, or the closeness we have. If I could get that earlier with child number two, it would be nice.*

Thus, earmarked paternity leave could give fathers what Theo terms “a head start” on the relationship with their child. The stronger bond the father can gain from more time on paternity leave is mentioned by Sarah and Alexander as well. They argue that this not only benefits the father and the child but the mother as well:

Alexander: *The woman gains a husband that is better at spending time with his child (...) When I get home, I have no idea about her state. Has she just eaten, or is she starving? Has she just slept, or should she sleep? I just walk in the door, and then she is there, and then I don't know what is going on or where we are going (...) And paternity leave would make you the one that knew this.*

Sarah: *Yes, that is probably the most important gain from this.*

As Alexander mentions, a longer leave period can give men a better understanding of and insight into what it entails to stay at home with a baby, whilst it makes them more connected to the child and more in sync with its routines and needs. However, despite the positive results that can come from the implementation of earmarked paternity leave, most of the informants are primarily skeptical of the earmarking. The following part of the analysis deals with their arguments *against* the EU directive.

5.3.3 Arguments against the directive

As evident from the preliminary analysis, one couple is predominantly in favor of earmarked paternity leave, whereas the two other couples are more skeptical. What is identified as the most substantial criticism of earmarked paternity leave by these two couples concerns its “invasive character”. For them, earmarked paternity leave serves as an overly rigid frame for families, and it does not take the families into account who might want to distribute the parental leave differently. Thus, like the Danish politicians who have been hesitant to legislate on this

issue over the years, they have ambivalent feelings towards earmarked paternity leave: They argue that the idea of it is good, but that it is, however, perceived as being too invasive, since it interferes with a decision that is seen as private. This ambivalence is evident in the interview with Theo and Theresa:

Theresa: *Exactly because it is OUR child, our family, and we should decide how we are with her. However, I agree that we have to start somewhere, I think, and try to push it in this direction when that is what we want in the end.*

Although Theo and Theresa do see some potential in the directive, they think it is a shame that it will interfere with a decision that should be entirely up to the parents themselves. As such, they are concerned that the earmarked leave restricts the freedom of the families. In fact, the more we talk about earmarking throughout the interview, Theresa becomes more skeptical towards the directive:

Theresa: *Well, now we have thought and talked more about it [earmarked leave], and actually, I like it less and less, in a way (...) In fact, I do not think it should be earmarked at all.*

Similarly, albeit Alexander is convinced that the intention behind the legislation is good and that men can benefit from being “pressured” (his phrasing) into the role as the primary caregiver for the child, he is still somewhat reluctant towards the implementation of earmarked paternity leave. Since he was on sick leave and worked from home due to the COVID-19 pandemic for more than six months in the spring of 2020, he decided to drop the two months he had planned to go on leave. However, had the directive been implemented at that time, he would have had to stay home for the two months. This makes Alexander fear that the rigidity of earmarked leave might put pressure on some families for whom the directive is not suitable:

Alexander: *And that's how it is with these kinds of rules – they are usually good in general, but sometimes they hit completely awry (...) A special paragraph is sometimes needed.*

The same goes for Theo and Theresa, who wanted Theresa to stay home, and they would not have been able to distribute the way they wanted if the directive had been implemented then:

Theo: *Principally, it is a pity that they determine it. We wanted that Alma [daughter] stayed home as long as possible, but at the same time, we wanted it to be Theresa who stayed home. That was simply what made sense to us.*

Although Theo is convinced that the directive will have a positive impact, he is skeptical that the directive will be forced upon people, as it would have been for them. In relation hereto, Sarah addresses the fact that there might be fathers who do not want to go on leave, and she thinks it is a shame that the nine weeks in those cases will “go to waste”, as she articulates it. She would prefer if it were a decision to be made entirely by each couple, although she hopes that the majority of fathers will take advantage of the directive:

Sarah: *There will be cases where the father does not want it, and then it is too bad that it will go to waste. I think it is a shame that it is not up to each couple anymore, but I do hope that fathers will choose to take their part of the leave (...) But of course, I can understand that you can have an exciting job and that it can be difficult to leave a bunch of work tasks behind.*

Here, it is interesting that Sarah solely talks about men who would not want to take their earmarked part since they might have an exciting job that is difficult to leave behind. This echoes Reinicke’s point that men’s status and masculinity are connected to their position on the job market. Further, it resembles Butler and Bourdieu’s point that social constructions of gender can appear natural through regulations, discipline, discursive praxes, and habitual schemes, respectively. Thus, Sarah expresses a taken-for-granted perception that men to a lesser extent than women want to pursue family life and take up parental leave, which from the perspective of Butler proves how gendered discourses construct gender as a stable identity from which certain acts follow – in this case, that women and men by virtue of their gender have different approaches to work and family life (2007, p. 191).

Regarding the economic compensation for the earmarked paternity leave, its size is not established in the directive, as it will be up to each member state of the European Union to decide the compensation. However, the directive dictates that the compensation must be enough to establish an incentive for both parents to use their earmarked period. Sarah and Alexander express concern if that is not the case:

Sarah: *If the father has a higher income, which unfortunately often is the case, and you live in a house based on that income, then it can be problematic that*

he HAS to take two months paternity leave (...) You can have put yourself in a position, where you can't afford that the father is going on parental allowance, too.

Alexander follows up and says in a sarcastic tone:

Alexander: *“Now you have to go on leave, and you get less money, and then you have to live on the street.”*

Theo and Theresa are skeptical in terms of the economic repercussions of the directive as well. As Sarah and Alexander, they are worried that earmarked paternity leave will negatively influence the economy within the families when men, who averagely have higher earnings, are “forced” to stay home. Thus, the informants express how important the character of economic compensation of the directive is. This is in line with previous research that concluded how proper wage compensation is essential to get more men to take up paternity leave and that the negative economic repercussions are one of the most common barriers for men in taking more of the parental leave (Bloksgaard 2011, p. 37; Deding 2010, p. 110; Jul Jacobsen, Heegaard Klynge & Holt 2013, p. 46).

5.3.4 The paradox of perceived coercion

As stated in the introduction of this thesis, Denmark had a four-week earmarked paternity leave period back in 1998-2002, which had the effect that more men took up a bigger part of the parental leave (Rostgaard & Lausten 2016, p. 289). However, when the prime minister at the time, Anders Fog Rasmussen, and his right-wing government won the national election in 2001, they removed the earmarking with the argument that it was too “coercive” and that parental leave should be a decision for the families only (Borchorst 2004, p. 271; Borchorst 2006, p. 16; Rostgaard & Lausten 2016, pp. 285-286). Yet, the government kept the earmarked maternity leave period of 14 weeks and thereby, paradoxically, did not question that this could be considered “coercive”. In the interview with Sally and Martin, Sally reacts strongly to this paradox:

Sally: *What the hell is that?! I am very provoked by this! That is so hypocritical! Don't you see, Martin?! “No, that is coercion, those four weeks”, and then to the mother: “You have to have 14 weeks!”*

Martin: *Well, again, this goes back to the old-fashioned view.*

Sally: *It is biological, yeah, yeah, yeah! Wow, we are so conservative in Denmark!*

Martin: *Everything is so old-fashioned [and adds in a sarcastic tone]: Don't fix what isn't broken.*

When asked in the interview with him alone, Martin expresses how he does not perceive earmarked paternity leave as forced but rather as a gift. In this context, however, he acknowledges why some can perceive it as coercion, as it can potentially “endanger” the manhood for some men:

Interviewer: *As I understand your position on this, you don't see a problem that it will be earmarked for the father? That is coercive?*

Martin: *I don't see it as coercion at all. I see it as a gift! But I understand why some would perceive it like that. Again, it is a very old-fashioned view that you take away some manhood by asking them to stay at home and become “a housewife”. For some reason, there is still a lot of the masculine bullshit that many men have to achieve.*

Interviewer: *Do you think some would perceive it as less masculine?*

Martin: *Yes, definitely (...) In my family, it has been like that. The man should not stay at home! “It is strange”, they say straight out.*

Interviewer: *It is the man who should bring the money home?*

Martin: *Yes, it is the man who is the breadwinner. And I even have received comments about how it is bizarre what I am doing [staying home with his son due to unemployment] (...) “Why are you home? Shouldn't you be out making money, while your child and the mother stay home?”. Yes, I should, but I am grateful for the time I have with my child. I have never been embarrassed about it. I have always just defended it.*

In the above, Martin expresses how his choice to stay home with his son while unemployed has caused negative reactions from his family. Butler's notion of the heterosexual matrix can explain this, as Butler with this notion argues that individuals are forced to live within constructed categories of gender (man/woman). Therefore, it is important that individuals coherently act and desire “correct” to be an “intelligible” gender to be accepted (Butler 2007, pp. 23-24). Thus, it comes to appear as less “masculine” to go against the norm of the man as

the breadwinner, since gender come to be constructed as a stable identity from which certain acts follow, and by breaching these gender norms, Martin is thus not recognized for his gender performance. Due to the emergence of new ideals in fatherhood, as stated by Reinicke, it is slowly becoming more legitimate that men like Martin are emotionally involved with their children without being perceived as less masculine (2013, p. 103). However, as Martin's example testifies, overcoming traditional gender norms in relation to parental leave is an ongoing battle.

When confronted with the paradox of perceived coercion, Theo and Theresa acknowledge that they have not thought that it is seen as coercion for men but not for women. Theresa says:

Theresa: (...) *Well, yes, that's funny. I haven't even thought about that. I haven't actually even questioned that, of course, it is [coercion for women as well].*

Consequently, Theresa and Theo propose that the whole leave period should be set free and made optional, thus nothing can be perceived as coercive. Sarah and Alex agree with this:

Sarah: *I like that it is optional because it requires taking a stand and making a conscious decision.*

Alexander: *I agree. Let it be optional, for God's sake!*

However, Alexander is convinced that it will not make a difference to make the whole leave period flexible since the 14 weeks that are earmarked for women is "natural", as he phrases it:

Alexander: *I don't think it would change anything because it is so natural that the mother takes it. I have a hard time imagining that anyone thinks: "How annoying that I HAVE to go on maternity leave".*

Again, like Sarah has expressed the gendered expectation that men, to a greater extent than women, are career-minded and less likely to prioritize family life, the quote above shows how Alexander similarly expresses the expectation that all mothers are happy to go on maternity leave. Again, this shows the numerous gender norms connected to parental leave taken for granted as universal truths. When confronted with the paradox of perceived coercion, Sarah and Alexander, however, does acknowledge how they are trapped in "normative roles":

Interviewer: *I think a lot about the fact that earmarked paternity leave is perceived as coercion; however, the earmarked maternity leave – the 14 weeks – is not.*

Alexander: *This is fun. Here am I thinking that I am open-minded, but I am still trapped in normative roles.*

Interviewer: *Well, I am too. I would have never thought of it as coercion before I started my research. I just think it is interesting...*

Alexander: *It is!*

Sarah: *I can merely think about it from the perspective of having completed a pregnancy and given birth – I do not feel like it is coercion at all! Rather, I see it as a gift – a reward for carrying the child (...) But it is funny, I agree – why do you not see it as coercion?*

Interviewer: *No one ever questions the 14 weeks earmarked for the mother.*

Sarah: *No, exactly. And I don't feel like it is coercion in any way. That is what is funny about it, right? Why do we not think about it like that?*

Albeit Sarah and Alexander admit that it is paradoxical that they have not perceived the earmarked maternity leave as coercion, Sarah mentions how it makes sense that women have time to breastfeed and therefore have a longer earmarked leave period. On the whole, despite that the informants agree that it is principally hypocritical that only earmarked paternity leave is perceived as force, it is, however, evident that most of the informants perceive the 14 weeks currently earmarked for the woman as something that makes sense in terms of biological factors such as breastfeeding and the healing of the woman's body after birth. Thus, albeit the informants acknowledge the paradox, earmarked maternity leave is still not questioned and perceived "coercive" to the same extent that earmarked paternity leave by default is.

As it is evident from the analysis above, parental leave and the question of earmarked paternity leave is a complex and ambivalent matter. Among the parents, there seems to be a trade-off between, on the one hand, more idealistic attitudes towards gender equality and, on the other, pragmatic considerations of economy, work, and family life. This puts the informants in an ambivalent position in terms of their attitudes towards earmarked paternity leave with the wish for more equality in relation to parental leave rights – principles that the informants

fundamentally adhere to – versus what is nevertheless perceived as invasive legislation that can potentially affect families negatively due to current economic conditions as well as individual preferences and needs.

6. SUMMARY AND FINAL DISCUSSION

The aim of this thesis has been to examine gender norms in parental leave praxes and attitudes towards earmarked paternity leave from the starting point of an EU directive on work-life balance for parents and carers that will implement earmarked paternity leave in Denmark by 2022. By interviewing three couples of new, first-time parents, the aim is to explore how the current skewed distribution of parental leave is constructed and reproduced through gender norms and, further, what arguments they have in favor and against earmarked paternity leave, respectively.

Albeit the female informants take on the largest responsibility for the family, the male informants actively participate in parenthood in terms of child care and housework, mirroring that the ideal of the caring and active father is gaining acceptance. Nevertheless, the traditional allocation of gender roles remains highly visible among the parents in terms of their distribution of parental leave. All three couples have distributed it in a traditional manner: The women have ended up taking the whole leave period, whereas the men have settled for the two weeks earmarked for them immediately after the birth. The informants' parental leave praxes are thus highly influenced by traditional conceptions about work, parenthood, and gender – including the persistent stereotype that the mother is the natural caretaker and that it is, therefore, most rational that she takes the majority of the leave. Aside from gender norms, factors such as economy and work situation have determined how the new parents distribute their parental leave. For example, it is evident that when parental leave is something that the fathers have to negotiate and is not a right, they are afraid to appear “difficult” by requesting leave from their employer, and they, therefore, abstain from doing so. Further, among the parents, one of the main explanations for their distribution of parental leave is economy. As the male informants have higher incomes than their partners, parental allowance is much lower than their wages, and it, therefore, made sense for the couples to let the mothers stay home with the baby.

The informants further mention that their distribution of parental leave is determined by what they regard as “personal preferences” in terms of who wanted to stay home. However, in this

regard, it is Butler and Bourdieu's argument that what is perceived as preferences is rather determined by gendered discourses and habitus, respectively, which instill certain gendered behaviors as "correct" and "natural" in the individual. Correspondingly, the parents thoroughly express their praxes as "natural", although it becomes evident that these praxes are rooted in tacit expectations to each gender – for example, that it is more natural for the mother to stay home and care for the child, and further, that the father would be bored if he was to stay home with a newborn. By living up to the criteria essential to the construction of male and female identity, each informant, therefore, gain recognition based on their gender performances.

Even though far from all the parents are favorably disposed towards the directive on earmarked paternity leave, they are all positive in terms of its potential to put focus on paternity leave – and by this, its potential to reduce the skewed distribution of parental leave between men and women. Thus, they perceive the directive as quoted: "a step in the right direction". The informants who are predominately positive about earmarked paternity leave acknowledge that political action is a necessary tool to alter the embedded gender norms relating to parental leave praxes. They argue that it will create a "new normal" and will be a potential eye-opener for those who would otherwise be hesitant to take paternity leave. Further, they mention the potential that it can provide women with better conditions in the labor market, as they are more likely to get hired or promoted in jobs when they are absent on maternity leave for a shorter time. Further, they claim that earmarked paternity will make it easier for men to claim their part of the leave – from both employer and partner. In relation hereto, the informants contemplate that the earmarking can change work culture and make us rethink our perception of fathers on leave. Lastly, what they mention as a positive effect of the earmarked paternity leave is that fathers will gain a stronger bond with their children – benefitting both mother, father, and child.

However, despite the positive results that the informants believe can come from earmarked paternity leave, the informants also express skepticism towards the EU directive. The most substantial criticism towards earmarked paternity leave concerns its "invasive character". The informants argue that the earmarking is good on paper, but in practice, it is, however, perceived as too invasive, as it interferes with a decision that is essentially private. It will, therefore, potentially put pressure on families for whom the earmarked paternity leave is not suitable. Further, they find it problematic if the earmarked leave is not properly compensated economically, as it will have consequences for the economy within many families. Despite the

fact that they perceive it to be principally hypocritical that only earmarked paternity leave is perceived as coercive, it is, however, evident that most of the informants perceive the 14 weeks currently earmarked for the women as something that makes sense in terms of biological factors such as breastfeeding and the healing of the women's body after birth. Thus, albeit recognizing this paradox, earmarked maternity is still not questioned and perceived coercive to the same extent that earmarked paternity leave by default is.

Overall, the results of this thesis are very much in line with previous studies, both in regards to findings related to gendered expectations at work and within the family, economic conditions and structural rights, and attitudes on earmarked paternity leave. However, the thesis contributes with in-depth perspectives on attitudes towards the current EU directive that is yet to be implemented. Further, the thesis contributes with a comprehensive analysis of how gendered discourses and gender norms influence choices and praxes related to parental leave, as well as attitudes towards earmarked paternity leave. For this purpose, the thesis applied Butler and Bourdieu, whose theoretical perspectives and different understandings of human agency have rarely been considered together to understand gender praxes in parental leave and the persistence of gender norms in this context – as repetitive performative acts and as embodiments of social structures, respectively.

Working with this thesis, it surprised me that the informants, despite the fact that they are modern and progressive in many ways, adhere to such traditional ways of distributing parental leave in praxis. While writing this thesis, I have realized how much our gender performance is determined by norms and traditional gender roles, which come to be seen as “natural” – to the point where it is barely questioned. Therefore, it has been interesting to witness how normative gender norms (through their tacit nature) affect how new, first-time parents act and express their thoughts in relation to parental leave. If I were to conduct a similar study, it would be interesting to include couples in which the fathers have taken some (or most) of the parental leave. This would likely contribute with perspectives reflecting less traditional praxes, thus nuancing the findings of this thesis.

Based on this study, several perspectives could be interesting to investigate further. Firstly, it was mentioned in the interviews that the fathers, as a result of COVID-19, had been more at home with their partner and child at the beginning of the child's life. However, due to my overall focus on the gender perspective in relation to parental leave, I did not go further into

this aspect in the interviews. However, this could be a perspective for further research: What it has meant for new parents that a pandemic has "forced" them to stay home and be with their newborn children in a way that would not have been possible under ordinary circumstances. An effect of the COVID-19 pandemic might be that more men have discovered the gains of being close to their child from an early stage. Secondly, it could be interesting to investigate further the divide between culture and biology in relation to the theme of parental leave, which I have only briefly touched upon in this thesis. In the interviews, it became evident that the informants understand their different praxes as parents from the basis of biological differences between them as men and women, respectively. For example, the female informants contemplate that they are biologically more inclined to be caring than their partner and have a biological urge to sleep near the child. Therefore, in further research, it could be interesting to examine how biological factors influence cultural understandings of parenthood and parental leave praxes.

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APPENDIX A

Interview guides

Interview with both parents

THEME	QUESTIONS
<p>Introduction</p>	<p>Thank you for participating – it is a big help!</p> <p>The interview will last about an hour, and it will be about your division of parental leave, gender roles in parenting and of course about what my thesis is about overall – earmarked paternity leave</p> <p>I will address different themes and aspects, and some of the questions <i>might</i> overlap, but it is merely to be able to cover the subject as good and thoroughly as possible</p> <p>You are guaranteed full anonymity – hence, it is only me as the researcher that will have access to the interview, and your names will be anonymized. Further, sensitive personal information will be deleted, when the interview is referred to in the thesis (name, places, etc.)</p>
<p>Distribution of parental leave</p>	<p>How have you chosen to distribute your parental leave?</p> <p>Which considerations did you have about the distribution? Why did you choose to distribute it like that?</p> <p>Did you agree on the distribution from the start, or was it something you discussed for a longer time?</p> <p>Have you had any reactions to your choice in your circle – positive or negative?</p> <p>Which factors influenced the way you decided to distribute the leave between you?</p> <p>(If they do not mention economy) Research show that economy has one of the greatest impacts on how much leave that parents take. On average, men earn more than women, and therefore it is typically women that uptake most of the parental leave. Has this played a role in terms of the distribution of leave between you? (If yes) How so?</p> <p>(If they do not mention their workplace – agreements/rights/culture)</p>

	<p>Research show that your workplace – the rights you have, and the agreements and culture, which exist there – is of great significance in terms of how much leave that you take up. For example, it matters if you work in a public or private sector, and if there is a culture, where it is legitimate to take parental leave. Has this played a role in terms of the distribution of leave between you? (If yes) How so?</p> <p>(If they do not mention biology) Have biology played any role in terms of your distribution of leave – including birth, attachment and/or breastfeeding? (If yes) How so?</p> <p>When looking back, would you have wished to distribute the leave differently than you have done?</p>
<p>Gender roles in relation to housework/parenthood/parental leave</p>	<p>How do you divide the domestic work between you?</p> <p>How does a day look like for you? Try to describe your routines in the course of a day and who takes care of what in relation to the household and your child</p> <p>How are your distribution of roles compared to how it has been traditionally between men and women, e.g. in terms of the care for the child?</p> <p>What do you associate with a father?</p> <p>What do you associate with a mother?</p> <p>Do you feel that you each can contribute with something different in relation to the leave/time with the child, e.g. physical activity, changing of diapers etc.? (If yes) Describe how you differ in your roles as parents</p> <p>Are one of you more physically active with the child than the other?</p> <p>As it is today, Danish women averagely take 90 % of the leave, which means that men take 10 %. Do you think that there are more women than men that wants a longer leave or why do you think the distribution is still that skewed? Is it a problem in your opinion?</p> <p>What do you think would need to happen in order to change it?</p>

	<p>Which gender norms still prevails in relation to parental leave today – if any?</p> <p>Which gender norms do you see expressed in yourself or other new parents that you know – if any?</p> <p>Do you feel that it is more legitimate for men today to take part of the parental leave compare to earlier? (If yes) How so?</p>
<p>Earmarked paternity leave</p>	<p>The European Union have decided that two months of earmarked paternity leave should be implemented in all Member States, including Denmark, by 2022. This way men will have right to two months of leave that will be annulled if they cannot or do not want to use them. What do you think about this political initiative?</p> <p>What do you see as possible advantages of earmarked paternity leave – if any?</p> <p>What do you see as possible disadvantages – if any?</p> <p>What would it mean for your family life if it was implemented today?</p> <p>The Danish politicians have been reluctant to legislate on parental leave and especially in terms of implementing earmarked paternity leave. Their overall argument has been that it should be up to the individual family to decide how their leave should be distributed and that the state should not interfere in this issue. What do you think about this? Do you agree or disagree that it should be up to the families themselves to decide?</p> <p>Let us say that you have another baby in two years and earmarked paternity leave is now a reality. How will this affect how you distribute the leave between you?</p> <p>Do you think that the earmarked paternity leave should be longer or shorter or is it two months suitable? Why?</p> <p>What would you say if the state by legislating on earmarked paternity leave encouraged that the distribution of leave should be 50/50?</p> <p>What effect do you anticipate earmarked paternity leave will have for gender equality?</p>

	<p>Research show that men take the leave that is earmarked for them, but that women take the majority of the leave that is not earmarked. This means that men averagely do not take much leave, when it is not earmarked. Why do you think that is?</p> <p>Why do you think that earmarked leave for men is considered coercive by some, when this is not usually the case when it comes to the earmarked leave for women?</p> <p>Besides earmarked paternity leave – what could otherwise make more men consider taking more leave? What should it personally take for you to divide the leave more equally between you?</p>
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Interview with the mother

THEME	QUESTIONS
<p>Introduction</p>	<p>Thank you for participating – it is a big help!</p> <p>The interview will last about 45 minutes and it will be about earmarked paternity leave, gender roles and norms in relation to being a mother, and about how you relate to your role as a mother.</p> <p>I will address different themes and aspects, and some of the questions <i>might</i> overlap, but it is merely to be able to cover the subject as good and thoroughly as possible</p> <p>You are guaranteed full anonymity – hence, it is only me as the researcher that will have access to the interview, and your name will be anonymized. Further, sensitive personal information will be deleted, when the interview is referred to in the thesis (name, places, etc.)</p>
<p>Preliminary questions – job situation and leave rights</p>	<p>First and foremost, I wish to ask: What is your profession? What do you do for a living?</p> <p>How much leave have you been entitled to?</p> <p>How much leave have you had?</p> <p>Are you/have you been satisfied with the length of your leave?</p>
<p>About being a mother – gender roles/norms and expectations</p>	<p>In your opinion, what characterizes a good mother?</p> <p>How would you describe your role as a mother as opposed to your partner?</p> <p>Are there anything you do differently as a parent than your partner? Any different activities or different chores you do?</p> <p>Can you contribute with something for your child that your partner cannot? (If yes) What?</p> <p>Is there something that has surprised you in the way you are a parent in relation to your gender? Something you from the start might not have been expecting you would do? (If yes) What?</p> <p>Do you feel like that there are different expectations of you as a mother than your partner as a father?</p>

	<p>Women are often portrayed as the one that is best in caring for the child. What are your thoughts on this?</p> <p>Mothers are automatically assigned to a mother group, but fathers are not offered a father group? What do you think of about that?</p> <p>Can you contribute with something different in your leave than your partner? (If yes) With what?</p>
Maternity leave	<p>How important was it for you to have maternity leave?</p> <p>How important was it for you that your partner went on maternity leave too?</p> <p>Was there anything that surprised you in relation to your right to maternity leave?</p> <p>How did maternity leave fit into your work life/your career?</p> <p>Did you have any concerns by asking your boss for maternity leave? (If yes) Which concerns was this?</p> <p>How did your work and boss react to your wish to go on maternity leave?</p> <p>Are there any limits to how much maternity leave, you feel/felt, you can/could ask for? (If they have been at home) What has it meant for you to stay at home with your child?</p> <p>Is there anything that has surprised you by staying home with your child?</p> <p>Do you feel it is as legitimate for your partner to go on parental leave as you? Why/why not?</p> <p>What do you think about the skewed distribution of leave that still prevails among men and women in Denmark today? Do you feel that men are disadvantaged in terms of rights, or are you content with the rights you each have?</p>
Earmarked paternity leave	<p>As we talked about in the other interview, from 2022 it becomes possible for you to uptake two months of paternal leave that is your partner's only. What is opinion on earmarked paternity leave?</p>

	<p>What does it mean for you that you in two years from now have the right to two months of leave? Do you expect that you will make use of these months, if you are having another baby?</p> <p>How would you feel about your partner having at least two months of the overall parental leave?</p> <p>Numbers from the other Nordic countries show that more men make use of the earmarked paternity leave and thereby take more leave off than before the earmarking. Do you think this will be the case in Denmark too?</p> <p>Why do you think that many women see their leave as theirs, and that the men “take something from them” if they get earmarked paternity leave? Do you feel this way?</p> <p>What do you think in general prevents men from taking more of the total parental leave?</p> <p>Besides earmarked paternity leave, what do you think can get your partner and other men to take more of the parental leave?</p> <p>In hindsight, would you have wished that you have distributed the parental leave differently? Why/why not?</p> <p>If you were to decide yourself and not think about your partner, economy or work, how much leave had you wished to take and how would your distribution of leave have looked like?</p>
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Interview with the father

THEME	QUESTIONS
Introduction	<p>Thank you for participating – it is a big help!</p> <p>The interview will last about 45 minutes and it will be about earmarked paternity leave, gender roles and norms in relation to being a father, and about how you relate to your role as a father.</p> <p>I will address different themes and aspects, and some of the questions <i>might</i> overlap, but it is merely to be able to cover the subject as good and thoroughly as possible</p> <p>You are guaranteed full anonymity – hence, it is only me as the researcher that will have access to the interview, and your name will be anonymized. Further, sensitive personal information will be deleted, when the interview is referred to in the thesis (name, places, etc.)</p>
Preliminary questions – job situation and leave rights	<p>First and foremost, I wish to ask: What is your profession? What do you do for a living?</p> <p>How much leave have you been entitled to?</p> <p>How much leave have you had?</p> <p>Are you/have you been satisfied with the length of your leave?</p>
About being a father – gender roles/norms and expectations	<p>In your opinion, what characterizes a good father?</p> <p>How would you describe your role as a father as opposed to your partner?</p> <p>Are there anything you do differently as a parent than your partner? Any different activities or different chores you do?</p> <p>Can you contribute with something for your child that your partner cannot? (If yes) What?</p> <p>Is there something that has surprised you in the way you are a parent in relation to your gender? Something you from the start might not have been expecting you would do? (If yes) What?</p> <p>Do you feel like that there are different expectations of you as a father than your partner as a mother?</p>

	<p>Women are often portrayed as the one that is best in caring for the child. What are your thoughts on this?</p> <p>Mothers are automatically assigned to a mother group, but fathers are not offered a father group? What do you think of about that?</p> <p>Have you considered joining a father group? Why/why not?</p> <p>Can you contribute with something different in your leave than your partner? (If yes) With what?</p>
Paternity leave	<p>How important was it for you to have paternity leave?</p> <p>Was there anything that surprised you in relation to your right to paternity leave?</p> <p>How did paternity leave fit into your work life/your career?</p> <p>How is the culture for paternity leave in your workplace? Is it acceptable or is it frowned upon?</p> <p>(If they have had paternity leave) Did you have any concerns by asking your boss for paternity leave? (If yes) Which concerns was this?</p> <p>How did your work and boss react to your wish to go on paternity leave?</p> <p>Were there any limits to how much paternity leave, you feel/felt, you can/could ask for?</p> <p>(If they have been at home) What has it meant for you to stay at home with your child?</p> <p>Is there anything that has surprised you by staying home with your child?</p>
Earmarked paternity leave	<p>Do you feel it is as legitimate for you to go on parental leave as your partner? Why/why not?</p> <p>What do you think about the skewed distribution of leave that still prevails among men and women in Denmark today? Do you feel that you as a man are disadvantaged in terms of rights, or are you content with the rights you have?</p>

	<p>As we talked about in the other interview, from 2022 it becomes possible for you to uptake two months of paternal leave that is your only. What is opinion on earmarked paternity leave? What does it mean for you that you in two years from now have the right to two months of leave? Do you expect that you will make use of these months, if you are having another baby?</p> <p>Do you expect that earmarked paternity leave will make you take more time off with the baby than you have now? Why/why not?</p> <p>Do you think it will be easier to ask for leave at work, when earmarked paternity is implemented?</p> <p>Numbers from the other Nordic countries show that more men make use of the earmarked paternity leave and thereby take more leave off than before the earmarking. Do you think this will be the case in Denmark too?</p> <p>Why do you think that many women see their leave as theirs, and that the men “take something from them” if they get earmarked paternity leave?</p> <p>What do you think in general prevents men from taking more of the total parental leave?</p> <p>Besides earmarked paternity leave, what do you think can get you and other men to take more of the parental leave?</p> <p>In hindsight, would you have wished that you have distributed the parental leave differently? Why/why not?</p> <p>If you were to decide yourself and not think about your partner, economy or work, how much leave had you wished to take and how would your distribution of leave have looked like?</p> <p>If you had the opportunity to take half the leave or more, would you? Why/why not?</p>
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