Negotiating Fathers’ Care: Canadian Fathers’ Leave-Taking as Conformity and Change

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Sociology
University of Toronto

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Abstract

Despite some changes to the ways contemporary families are handling the allocation of paid and unpaid work, the path of least resistance still tends be maternal caregiving with mothers more likely than fathers to cut back on their employment or drop out of the workforce entirely. Because men typically maintain, and may even strengthen, their ties to the labour market at the transition to parenthood, offering them paid parental leave is thought to provide an important opportunity for fathers to develop the skills and sense of responsibility that are characteristic of mothers’ parenting, ultimately reducing gender inequality in families. Although leave schemes that specifically target fathers are praised for their high usage rates, there has been little research into the quality of men’s time at home. This dissertation addresses this gap in the literature by probing the time-bounded and gender-laden circumstances of early parenthood to consider the ways in which fathers’ early involvement might set the stage for their greater participation in domestic life. I do so by examining how Canadian fathers come to use, experience, and act in response to their time on parental leave. The men in this study waxed enthusiastically about the parenting skills and emotional bonds they developed while on leave. Many were so moved by the experience that they came to incorporate the values and practices of care into their identities. Yet at the same time, the allocation of leave time and couple’s subsequent divisions of housework
and domestic responsibility remained gendered. Couples had to engage with gendered cultural expectations that took men’s employment for granted but allowed them greater leeway than women when it came to meeting parenting standards. Nevertheless, I argue that the transformative potential of fathers’ leave-taking should not be dismissed – even small changes to couples’ gendered roles and fathers’ identities are important in undoing gender inequality.
Acknowledgments

The journey to completing my PhD has been long and winding. I have felt stalled and unfocused too many times to count, but my committee and the accommodating academic environment at the University of Toronto sociology department have remained a beacon of light guiding – and sometimes pushing – me forward over the last number of years. First and foremost, I offer my sincerest gratitude to my supervisor, Bonnie Fox, who has supported me throughout my academic career with her patience and guidance while allowing me the room to work at my own pace. Without her continuous encouragement and insistence this thesis would have not been written, or at least not as well. Her keen eye for editing and knowledge of the field are inspiring, and I have benefitted from them through many drafts and rewrites. My other committee members, Judith Taylor and Josee Johnston, are two very gifted scholars whose insightful feedback provided important balance to my work by both motivating me to always think bigger and more critically, and reeling in my grander claims when I overlooked important nuance, respectively.

Though much has changed in my life since I began the PhD program, the continued love and support from my family has been a constant source of comfort and security. My parents set me on the path of lifelong learning, and along with my sister and extended family have stood behind me, ready to help in any way they could, over the many years it has taken me to get to this point. Having children while in graduate school has meant lots of opportunities for babysitting or otherwise supporting my attempt to juggle family and academia. As I studied how other couples made sense of and arranged their home and working commitments while simultaneously attempting the same, I have gained a deep appreciation of all the behind-the-scenes work that it takes to manage family life. I am very grateful to my participants – and especially my husband, Elad – for allowing me to examine and reflect on their choices, identities, and meanings concerning fatherhood. I couldn’t have dedicated the time or attention needed to my PhD without the support of a partner who has propped me up and pushed me forward at every turn. I dedicate this work to my three sons, Shai, Eitan, and Noam, with the hope that they will carry the seeds of a father’s deep and meaningful involvement on and forwards.
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Chapter 1
Introduction

1.1 Gendered Experiences of Parenthood

Research shows that managing the increased demands and time pressures of caring for young children often leads couples to develop more gendered divisions of work and responsibility as mothers and fathers tend to concentrate more on caregiving or earning, respectively (Fox 2009: 6; Yavorksy, Dush & Schoppe-Sullivan 2015; Hochschild 1989; Cowan & Cowan 1992). Feminists identify this unequal allocation of labour, time, and energy, wherein women are largely responsible for child-rearing and domestic work, while men engage in paid work outside the home, as a key source of gender inequality (Oakley 1974, Okin 1989; Friedan 1963; Luxton 1980). Dismantling the public/private divide is seen as necessary to recognizing women’s full personhood and citizenship and remedying the economic, political, social, and personal costs of caring disproportionately borne by them (Pateman 1988; Folbre 1994). Parental leave schemes are one way the state can help parents reconcile the competing demands of work and family that tend to promote gendered family arrangements. The introduction of these policies in Canada in 1971 represented a significant departure from the narrow view of women as caregivers that had been embedded in the unpaid leave plans previously available. For the first time, mothers had access to earnings-related wage replacement benefits that recognized both their labour rights and family obligations (Pulkingham & Van der Gaag 2004).

Acknowledging women as economic contributors in dual income families, however, does not necessarily address men’s involvement in unpaid caring work. Although there have been important shifts in the ways contemporary couples handle the allocation of paid and unpaid work – with women spending more time doing paid work and less time on housework, and men increasing the time they spend on housework and childcare – men continue to do less domestic work than their partners (Bianchi, Milkie, Sayer & Robinson 2012; Milan, Keown & Urquijo 2016; Fisher et al. 2007). The parental path of least resistance tends to be maternal caregiving with mothers more likely than fathers to “drop out of the labor force, cut back to part-time employment, take less demanding jobs, choose occupations that are more family-friendly, or pass up promotions” (Bianchi, Raley & Wang 2012: 1423). Men remain considerably less likely
to experience even a temporary absence from the labour market during the transition to parenthood (Rehel 2014). In fact, fathers typically maintain and may even strengthen their focus on economic provisioning in the post-birth period (Townsend 2002; Fox 2009; Glauber 2008; Sanchez & Thomson 1997).

Nevertheless, previous studies suggest that certain policy measures can support an earner-carer society – “a social arrangement in which women and men engage symmetrically in paid work and unpaid caregiving and where young children have ample time with their parents” (Gornick & Myers 2008: 313). In addition to flexible work schedules and subsidized government childcare, paid family leaves are deemed necessary to redistribute caregiving responsibilities between couples as well as extend them to employers and the state (Haas 2003; Kamerman 2000; Gornick & Myers 2008). Specifically, analysts argue that father-targeted or reserved parental leave schemes represent the “premier league” of policies promoting men’s caregiving because they significantly enhance fathers’ usage rates (O’Brien 2009: 195; see also Caragata and Miller 2008). Indeed, the introduction in 2006 of a separate generous plan in Quebec (QPIP), providing fathers with three to five weeks of non-transferable paternity leave, increased Quebecois’ fathers’ leave-taking dramatically – to over 85 percent in 2015 (Statistics Canada 2016). In contrast, fathers’ leave use in the rest of Canada more than tripled to 10 percent in 2001 when the parental leave portion was extended from 10 to 35 weeks under the Employment Insurance (EI) program (Marshall 2003), but has since hovered around 12 percent (McKay, Marshall & Doucet 2012). The difference in usage rates is taken as confirmation that “gender-neutral” parental leave schemes, which implicitly rather than explicitly include men, do not promote greater father involvement (O’Brien 2009: 199; Tremblay 2009).

Assuming that greater access to fathers’ parental resources translates into more benefits to families (see O’Brien 2009; Caragata & Miller 2008; Pleck 2007) is problematic however. In fact, the data suggests that leave-taking itself does not necessarily have a substantial impact on the gendered division of domestic work and responsibility; it is the length and circumstances of fathers’ time at home that are the more significant predictors of their future involvement (Wilson & Prior 2009; Almqvist and Duvander 2014; Chronholm 2004; Haas & Hwang 2008; Nepomnyaschy and Waldfogel 2007). Although statistics can give us a good idea about the quantity of leave users, they tell us little about the quality of men’s time at home. As Haataja (2009: 18-19) cautions: “How long do fathers really look after their child on their own, and how
long are they co-carers, for example, while on paternity leave or while the mother [uses] vacation [time]?” (Haataja 2009: 18-19). Indeed there remains scant research into what fathers do as primary parents (Brandth & Kvande 2016; Wall 2014).

Although the small, but rich body of literature on stay-at-home fathers (Doucet 2006; Solomon 2014; Chesley 2011; Risman 1986) offers some parallels to the experience of being at home during the initial weeks and months of parenthood, prolonged primary caregiving amongst men remains quite rare. Examining the day to day reality and impact of employed men’s shorter and more temporary break from paid work likely has wider relevance. This dissertation project thus addresses this gap in the literature by examining how fathers come to use, experience, and act in response to their time on parental leave. My research probes the time-bounded and gender-laden circumstances of early parenthood and considers the ways in which fathers’ extensive involvement in caregiving during the first year of life – in what is conventionally understood to be women’s area of expertise – might set the stage for men’s greater participation in domestic life and the eventual realization of the goal of equal parenthood (Haas 1992: 14). I do so by investigating three separate, but highly related research questions that form the substantive paper topics developed in this dissertation: (1) How do fathers come to take leave and what couple-level negotiations are involved in the decision-making process? (2) How do fathers who take parental leave experience and make sense of their time at home given cultural expectations of masculinity and breadwinning? (3) To what extent does fathers’ leave-taking hold the potential to promote gender equality in families through redistributions of labour, care, and responsibility?

In order to begin answering these questions, I use this introductory chapter to establish the significance of studying parental leave as a site of familial negotiation. Next, I articulate the theoretical framework guiding this research. If the division of domestic work and responsibilities is critical for imagining a future of gender equality – the assumption underlying this study – then research on the processes by which men become more involved is key (Oliker 2011). Looking at gender in terms of social relations allows for consideration of how conventional expectations are built into families, but can be resisted and reworked through the negotiated interactions of their socially situated members (Erickson 2003: 511). A detailed discussion of the methods used in this study follows. I conclude this chapter with a brief summary of the three papers that comprise the body of my dissertation.
1.2 Why Study Fathers’ Leave-Taking?

Though research on primary care fathers demonstrates that men can parent in ways quite similar to mothers when that is required of them (Risman 1986; Doucet 2006; Chesley 2011), gendered divisions of work and responsibility tend to be the paths of least resistance for heterosexual families (Fox 2009, 2001; Walzer 1998; Cowan & Cowan 1992). Problematizing the specialization in roles couples tend to adopt when they become parents, gender theorists argue for a family model in which men and women engage in both paid and unpaid work equally. The assumption is that if men experience the transition to parenthood in a way that is similar to women’s, they will come to develop and enact the sense of responsibility that is characteristic of mothers’ parenting (Rehel 2014; Gornick & Myers 2008; Haas 1992). Offering men paid parental leave is thus thought to be an important step in removing some of the practical constraints to their becoming engaged and equal parents (Haas & Hwang 2008; Ray, Gornick & Schmitt 2010; Singley & Hynes 2005).

Although designating time for fathers’ leave-taking may be the most effective way of changing uptake patterns, it can’t be taken for granted that a man’s time with baby will lead to greater equality. Indeed, “the expectations outweigh the evidence” (Bjornholt 2012). Thus it is important to examine how men actually experience leave – and Canada is an ideal place to do so. It is one of the few OECD countries where only a well-compensated gender-neutral leave policy exists (O’Brien 2009). Fathers are entitled to take up to 35 weeks of paid leave from work when a child is born, although there is no period designated for them specifically. This makes fathers’ caregiving a matter of family negotiation rather than state interest (Caragata & Miller 2008), a context that is significant for two reasons.

First, it is easy to misconstrue men’s use of statutory leave if the focus is on measuring the quantity of benefits dispersed. With statistics often failing to distinguish the type of leave used, they offer only a hint about how men’s time off work is actually spent. High uptake rates in Finland, for instance, mask the fact that a great majority of fathers’ days are taken as paternity leave – rather short periods of time (as a rule 2 weeks) meant to support mothers’ recovery and help with household work and childcare (Haataja 2009). This is despite the introduction of individual, non-transferable, use-it-or-lose-it parental leave right (6-12 weeks) for dads called fathers’ quotas in the Nordic countries in the early 1990s (Haataja 2009: 5; Rostgaard 2002).
Quebec introduced this kind of reserved leave in 2006. And while the vast majority of Quebecois fathers now take leave, the duration tends to be short and largely in tandem with that of the mother, an arrangement that neither disrupts the mother-infant dyad or fathers’ breadwinning potential (McKay, Marshall & Doucet 2012: 221; Lammi-Taskula 2008). In a report by Duvander on behalf of the Swedish Social Insurance Inspectorate, the flexible and time-bounded nature of father’s quota models of parental leave is problematized: “Being on leave one day a week or prolonging a vacation is not the same thing as taking full responsibility for a child during a longer period of time” (ISF 2013b: 69, translated by Axelsson 2014). If introducing non-transferable leave adds time at home for fathers without necessarily challenging the expectation that mothers are primary caregivers (Leira 2002: 101), then it is important to avoid idealizing men’s high rates of leave-taking. Instead, attention should be paid to the day-to-day reality of parental leave for fathers who engage in prolonged caregiving. Canada provides such a context.

Second, because Canadian fathers’ leave use necessarily reduces the amount of time available to their spouse, this context also provides the opportunity to explore how couples perceive and rationalize the sharing of leave. Little attention has been paid to the way mothers and fathers negotiate how to arrange their work and family lives, including the use of paid leaves, in the early days and months of parenthood (but see Singley & Hynes 2005). In some settings this is because strong attachments to cultural ideals of conventional masculinity make fathers’ leave use unlikely (Almqvist 2008; Karu & Kasearu 2011). Overall, international research suggests that it is mothers who are seen as the rightful beneficiaries of leave policies. Like Australian fathers reluctant to take leave time away from their partners (Whitehouse, Diamond & Baird 2007), for instance, Canadian dads have been found to put mothers’ wishes first and see only individual entitlement leave, such as vacation time, sick days, or employer-paid time off, as their own (McKay & Doucet 2010: 307). Even in Sweden, where fathers have been entitled to half of the parental leave for more than 40 years, it is taken for granted that the mother is the parent who should be at home (Bekkengen 2006: 154). Discussions about sharing parental leave only happen when the man has openly expressed a desire to do so, and even in that case “fathers’ parental leave is often simply a residual,” considered only if women want to return to work before the end of the designated time (Sundstrom & Duvander 2002: 443). With maternal caregiving widely taken for granted, it becomes clear that setting aside time for fathers renders negotiations largely unnecessary – which is not the case for men’s non-reserved leave use in Canada.
Although the literature offers a compelling rationale against the use of gender-neutral leave policies, these claims clearly must be interpreted cautiously. Non-targeting policies may be underused by fathers (O’Brien 2009; Caragata and Miller 2008; Haas 1992), and lack the “gentle force” (Leira 2006: 39) or “transformative power” (Brandth & Kvande 2013) of a national quota system in which men’s leave-taking becomes normalized. Nevertheless, exploring how couples decide to allocate leave time to fathers can reveal more about the micro-level workings of social change than focusing on men who take advantage of leave-time that policy earmarks for them. Examining fathers’ use of parental leave in Canada, though comparatively uncommon, is theoretically important because it enables consideration of the gendered boundary points where couples experience and handle conflict that can ultimately lead to an unsettling of conventional arrangements (Sullivan 2004; Deutsch 2007).

1.3 Theoretical Approach

Considering how men negotiate the division of parental leave, spend their time with baby, and subsequently allocate the work of, and responsibility for, childcare and housework provide the opportunity to examine what Connell (1987, 2005) calls the crisis tendencies of the current gender order. Referring to the wider patterns of power relations between men and women that currently cumulate in men’s surplus of resources, power, prestige, and authority, here gender is conceived as a historically-composed set of expectations or rules built into the major social organizations of society, such as family, religion, or the workplace (Connell 1987; Lorber 1994; Matthews 1984). The building blocks of these structures are the enduring patterns of relationships – “ways that people, groups, and organizations, are connected and divided” that condition practice (Connell 2002: 54). Although, interactions often reproduce the social order from which they emerge, it is important to acknowledge that these dynamics – and the structure they constitute – are socially formed and thus can be transformed over time through changes that may be external to the gender order or generated from instabilities within it. This is an important shift away from structural theories of gender inequality emerging out of the women’s liberation movement of the 1960s that rendered individual agency a moot point (see Rubin 1975; Armstrong and Armstrong 1987; Hartman 1981).

Social constructionist theories, in response, posited gender as something that individuals actively do on a daily basis as they affirm their identities, not the institutional demands for particular
behaviours proposed by macro perspectives (Coltrane 1989; Walzer 1998). Yet even as this micro approach recognizes that individuals make choices about how to present themselves and interpret others, because gender is done by individuals who manage their conduct at the risk of being held accountable to cultural standards of masculinity and femininity (West & Zimmerman 1987), there is no accounting for change in this theory. An integrative approach takes the best of both worlds by recognizing that gender is accomplished at the level of everyday practice, but that practice cannot float free from its circumstance. Interactions are always grounded in a structure of social relations that defines possibilities and consequences, but that also has no existence outside the practices through which people and groups conduct those relations (Connell 2002: 55; Connell 1987: 95).

As the prime example of a gendered institution (Martin 2004: 1266), the way gendered expectations are built into families and how these can be reworked has long been a concern of feminists. By the 1960s, the implications of the division of work into public and private spheres for gender inequality sparked the second wave of feminism with the problematizing of women’s economic dependence on men and their immersion in housework and full-time motherhood. Widespread acknowledgement of this “problem with no name” (Friedan 1963) and the inequalities rooted in women’s domestic responsibilities coincided with other important social changes. The abolition of marriage bars, availability of birth control, access to abortion, and changes in divorce laws (Guppy & Luongo 2015) increased women’s participation in the public sphere and resulted in them entering the workforce in unprecedented numbers. All of these changes made for an unsettling of conventions around sex and gender that is still being managed within families. Although the assumption was that women’s increased employment outside the home would be accompanied by men’s greater sharing in domestic activities, women continue to do a disproportionate share of housework and childcare (Raley, Bianchi & Wang 2012: 1422; Bianchi, Milkie, Sayer & Robinson 2012; Milan, Keown & Urquijo 2016).

Gender scholars call for men’s involvement as one way to ease the costs of domestic work on women and as a route towards greater gender equality in families (Ruddick 1989; Haas 1992, Lamb 1997; Wisensale 2001). Yet an understanding of the mechanisms underlying men’s familial involvement is relatively undeveloped (Schober 2014). Analyses of how men and women do gender in families (Walzer 1998; Devault 1991; Doucet 2006) have largely been studies of gender conformity and conventionality (Deutsch 2007: 108). Although new mothers
and fathers must engage with ideals that define "good" mothering and fathering as qualitatively different (Singley & Hynes 2005: 379; see also Shirani, Henwood & Coltart 2012, Walzer 1998, McMahon 1995), it is important not to overlook behaviour that defies convention. The analysis of crisis tendencies is a question of identifying the dynamics that have the potential to transform normative conceptions of gender and ultimately drive institutional change (Deutsch 2007; Connell 1987; 2005). Sullivan (2004) argues that the seeds of change are present in day-to-day tensions and strains, such as disagreements about the way divisions of domestic labour and responsibility are allocated within families. Though gendered cultural expectations and social organization often constrain men and women’s behaviour as parents, doing gender differently can expand an individual’s identity and facilitate a wider feminist consciousness (Gerson & Peiss 1985) with the power to inspire collective action that can transform institutions (Deutsch 2007: 121). With the moral obligation to care usually bestowed upon mothers (McMahon 1995; Walzer 1998), the goal of this study is thus to understand how the context of men’s caregiving provided by their leave-taking might promote processes of change for fathers. Relatively few studies have looked into the negotiations and adaptations taking place at the level of household (Sullivan 2004: 217). Examining how men’s leave-taking may be implicated in the division of work and responsibility and the subtle and unsubtle relational dynamics between partners during this time thus provides an opportunity to develop this body of literature by considering how fathers’ interactional construction of identities and practices in the early weeks and months of parenthood might subvert the current gender order.

1.4 Methodology

In order to elucidate the sense-making of leave-taking fathers, I collected data on participants’ experiences and interpretations, relying on the voices of a sample of heterosexual couples (n=33) in Toronto and surrounding area, in which the husband took parental leave. Although unpaid or workplace-sponsored leaves may be possible, because this research enquires about the implications of Canada’s parental leave policy and couple-level negotiations on gender relations, I narrowed the sample to only fathers who used statutory leave. I selected six weeks as the minimum time at home in order to explore both the prolonged involvement in infant care that makes this subset of fathers theoretically significant and family-level negotiations that occur when women’s entitlement is considerably reduced. Participants were required to have taken
their leave within the two years preceding the study so memories and interpretations were more easily recalled for the purpose of generating detail-rich data.

I recruited through postings on neighbourhood groups on Facebook and online discussion (parenting-related and more general) forums with a high presence of Southern Ontarians. The resulting sample consisted of 31 heterosexual married couples and two common-law ones, all living within an hour of the Toronto area. Most couples were firmly in the upper middle class, based on occupation, income, and education levels. Household incomes ranged from $50,000 to $260,000, with an average combined salary of $163,000. This included two single income families where the men were once employed but currently stay-at-home fathers. The rest of the couples in this study were dual earners, with women and men each being primary breadwinner in nine families, defined here as earning at least 60 percent more than their spouses (Tichenor 1999). Those with lower education levels were found almost exclusively amongst the lower earners. One father had only a high school degree, three of the men and one of the women had attempted some college or university, and another three men and one woman had received their college diplomas. Nine of the men and 13 of the women had Bachelor’s degrees, and 17 of the men and 18 of the women had graduate or professional school degrees. The average age for both mothers and fathers in this study was 36. Finally, seven participants were visible minorities and the remainder were Caucasian. Appendix A provides further information about the leave-taking circumstances of the couples in this study.

Although the focus of my research is on why and how fathers come to use parental leave policies, the assumption underlying this study is that the way one spouse makes use of particular policies depends on how the other spouse uses them (see Singley & Hynes 2005). Thus participants had to be cohabitating with their partners and be willing to participate in a joint interview in order to be included. Interviewing couples together – and especially using the two interactive techniques discussed below – better approximated the conditions of daily family life by providing a context for lively discussion and joint meaning-making than relying on one spouse’s testimony alone (see also Allan 1980; Heaphy & Einarsdottir 2012; Valentine 1999).

First, during the interview, I asked participants to jointly rank a list of reasons that explained why they divided their parental leave the way they did. Although I wanted to understand the factors that shaped the way parental leave was used by participants, the goal of this activity was more to
encourage discussion and debate about the relative significance of each factor and get a sense of how much consensus or conflict was part of the couples’ decision making. Options included, but were not limited to, which parent was best suited to childcare, desire to spend time with baby, help recovery from birth, commitment to equality, best financial choice, formal workplace policies, and informal workplace norms.

Second, akin to Doucet’s (1996) Household Portrait technique, I asked couples to jointly chart the allocation of physical tasks and mental responsibilities across the first years of parenting, including each spouse’s time on leave, where applicable, so that I could ‘follow’ changes in their division of work over this time (see Appendix B). Though quantitative in design, my goal was not to simply tally parents’ time commitment to domestic work. Rather, observing how couples narrate their arrangements in situ helped bring to light the often invisible nature of domestic work and how it may be constructed, enacted and perceived differently within and across couples (Doucet 2006: 56-61). Participants collaboratively determined who took on a particular obligation using the five point scale: (1) wife only; (2) mostly wife with husband helping; (3) equally shared; (4) mostly husband with wife helping; and (5) husband only. There was a sixth option to indicate where couples get help from others (family members, friends, or hired help) or if they want to include commentary about a particular task. I gauged participation in childcare through tasks such as changing diapers, bathing the child, putting the child to bed, cutting his or her nails, soothing the child, and taking him or her to the doctor. Caregiving responsibility was operationalized as making sure there are diapers, planning birthday parties, determining when the child should see a doctor, and deciding which activities he or she should participate in. Measures for housework included making dinner, doing the laundry, tidying up, vacuuming, and shoveling snow, whereas I coded household responsibility as making sure there is food in the fridge, remembering important dates, and managing bill paying.

While Doucet’s (2006) Household Portrait technique asks couples who does the majority of worrying in the family, I felt this one question could not tap the varied dimensions of parental worry. Indeed Walzer’s (1998) research makes an important distinction between different kinds of worry that I employed in this study. First, I assessed “baby worry” – generated in response to the question of what baby needs (Walzer 1998: 34) – with questions about who is in tune with child’s feelings, worries about child’s health and well-being, and worries about what/how much children are eating. The second kind of worry is moral, captured by the question: ‘Am I being a
good parent?’ (Walzer 1998: 222; McMahon 1995), which I operationalized as worrying about doing a good job as a parent, feeling pressure to support the family, and being embarrassed when unexpected guests show up. This kind of worry is important because it enables inquiry into how parents encounter and engage with expectations of culpability.

In both activities I found the use of visual cues served as a way to help stimulate memories and stories of change and conflict. Interactive techniques helped manage “recall difficulties and the ex post facto rationalization of events and feelings” (Sullivan 2004: 218) as well as the conscious or unconscious desire to present a unified or official story (Hertz 1995). Although these tendencies can make it difficult to uncover the instances of tension, negotiation, and change over time that are important to this research, like Doucet (2006), I found that the interactional quality of the activity kept participants “on their toes, as they saw the technique[s] as something resembling a game or competition” (60). Couples spent as much, if not more, time talking to each other as they did physically completing the exercises. And given that neither allocations of parental leave nor household work are individually determined, using joint methods provided the setting to not only study the data generated by that interaction, but also the opportunity to study the interaction itself (Allan 1980), an important asset when studying “the complexities and contradictions of the contested realities of shared lives” (Valentine 1999: 73).

The interviews were semi-structured and lasted between one-and-a-half to two-and-a-half hours, usually in participants’ homes. Our lively discussions were based on a schedule of 50 to 60 open-ended questions asking both spouses about the decision-making process, their time on leave, ideas about parenting, and reflections on sharing parental leave. I also interviewed fathers separately approximately two to three weeks later for a 45 to 90 minute follow-up in order to expand on the parental leave experience, participants’ feelings about their time at home, how they square caregiving against cultural expectations about masculinity, as well as anything else they may not have wanted to discuss with their spouse present. Because individuals do not necessarily conceive of their parenting in terms of what it means to them or how it connects to their identity, I asked questions prompting participants to tell stories about specific fathering memories and experiences in order to elicit narratives better suited for analysis. Using both individual and couple interviews ensured participants’ voices could be heard and analyzed comparatively (see Heaphy & Einarsdottir 2012; Valentine 1999). The post-hoc individual and joint narratives of leave allocation that emerged are the data upon which this paper is based.
All interviews were audiotaped and later transcribed. Following recommendations in Kvale (1996), transcription did not include every pause or verbal mannerism, but was otherwise verbatim. I manually coded the interviews and analyzed them following the principles of grounded theory and ‘saturation’ outlined by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and later Charmaz (2004). This rigorous set of procedures provides the tools for studying the meanings, actions, and intentions of participants by forcing researchers to attend closely to what happens in the empirical world and providing procedures to tease out the meanings and processes emerging from the research process (Charmaz 2004: 503). The first step is immersing oneself in the data as it is collected. To do so, I made analytic notes about emerging themes and questions after each interview and began transcription simultaneously with data collection. Although my knowledge of the literature of “new fatherhood” had led me to expect that leave taking represented a commitment to gender equality amongst men, it became clear early on this was not necessarily the case and so I revisited my interview questions to better tap participants’ lived experiences and their constructions of them (Charmaz 1990: 1192). Initial analysis involved reading through the data line by line and developing a series of open codes reflecting the themes that emerged repeatedly. Memo writing moved this process a step forward to define components carefully, distinguish between minor and major categories, and begin to delineate how they are related (Charmaz 2006: 85). Through constant comparison these codes were later developed into focused categories of analysis which I focused on more heavily during subsequent interviews.

Because of the nature of the dissertation requirements, I conducted a preliminary literature review with the proposal of this research, and therefore did not enter the analysis free from preconceived concepts or hypotheses, as per the original grounded theory formulation by Glaser and Strauss (1967). As a mother myself, many of the questions I asked of my participants, and later data, derived from my own experience of the transition to parenthood and awareness of the subtle and overt negotiations and adjustments involved in adapting to a new baby and definition of family life. Like many researchers who ‘start from where they are,’ my familiarity meant I was very attuned to the rich narratives and at times painful struggles participants’ shared with me, but also found it difficult to decipher the sociological significance of interactions I was inclined to take for granted (Fox 2009: 292; McMahon 1995). Recognizing that ideas and concepts do and should enter into the research at all stages as a tool to describe, explain, and understand the lived experiences of participants (Denzin 1989; Charmaz 2014), I used memoing
to keep attuned to and deconstruct my perceptions and interpretations where appropriate. The arguments I present in this dissertation, though informed by my interests and previous exposure to theory, are firmly grounded in participants’ understandings and experiences.

1.5 Chapter Summaries

When examining how couples divided parental leave, interpreted the experience of being at home with baby, or allocated domestic work, to be discussed in chapters two, three, and four respectively, I was struck by the latitude fathers had in determining the extent of their involvement. Whereas beliefs about the natural and vital character of maternal care gave women’s time with baby moral weight (McMahon 1995; Walzer 1998; Doucet 2006; Shirani, Henwood & Coltart 2012), these same pressures did not exist for the men in this study. As I discuss in chapter two, the ways couples allocated parental leave revealed that fathers’ time with baby was an individual decision – based on the men’s personal interest or their family circumstances. I found that without strong social support for their involvement, fathers’ preference for leave-taking was susceptible to cultural ideas about proper family roles that prioritized mothers’ caregiving and thus the men’s leave-time was curtailed. Notably, the less choice fathers had, the longer the time spent at home; feeling that they “had to” take leave enabled participants to adopt unconventional arrangements without worrying about not meeting gendered role expectations. This was also the case when men’s access to employer benefits coincided with a woman’s career attachment and a financial logic came to supersede the moral weight placed on maternal care.

Examining how fathers who take parental leave experience and make sense of their time at home, chapter three elaborates on the significance of gendered cultural expectations. Here I establish how being exempt from cultural pressures to parent the “right way” that mothers face, and being celebrated as “good fathers” just for spending time with baby, contributed to the ease with which men incorporated parenting into their individual identities. Being moved by caregiving was most likely to occur when men were deeply involved in daily childcare – especially as solo leave-takers. Feeling good enough about being on parental leave that nurturing became constitutive of self, however, was only possible if the risk was low – because the men had already eschewed hegemonic masculinity or accomplished it through their employment. Thus most men did feel some cultural expectations acutely – those related to earning. The
fathers who felt judged and uneasy while on parental leave were those who had trouble positioning their employment as a primary part of their identities. Caregiving presented a moral hurdle for men who felt insecure about their occupational success because of lower earnings in the public or non-profit sector, often in conjunction with a higher-earning spouse.

The significance of how men interpret their involvement is further addressed by considering the way couples handle the work and responsibility of family life subsequent to men’s leave-taking. In chapter four I argue that fathers’ involvement in the domestic sphere is contingent on their personal sense of duty towards its various responsibilities. The men in this study presented a remarkable dedication to the care of their children and the vast majority were as involved in the tasks of childcare as their partners. Yet because gendered norms remain entrenched within families and broader society, fathers felt less obligation to be involved in household tasks or the mental work of caregiving. Although more than a third of couples shared housework because of their penchant for cleaning or because it was “only fair,” it tended to be framed as something the women were more invested in. Nevertheless, women’s equal or higher incomes and men’s solo-leave-taking seemed to encourage fathers’ sense of obligation towards household upkeep. Taking caregiving responsibility, in contrast, hinged on the interaction of both men and women’s ideas about who should be doing this mental work. Couples were more likely to share big picture planning when men were specifically committed to being involved in decision-making, and the sense of moral obligation to be in control of their children’s lives did not particularly resonate with their wives. For just over half the couples in this study, however, fathers’ indifference was paired with mothers’ guilt about not meeting the standards of intensive mothering, leading the women to handle a disproportionate share of caregiving responsibility.

Chapter five synthesizes the results from my dissertation papers and argues for the value of hearing from families at the cusp of social change. Examining the practical and cognitive negotiations that occur around dividing parental leave, being at home with baby, and subsequent divisions of labour, care, and responsibility, reveal the significant role of social expectations – or lack thereof – in shaping fathers’ strategies and subjectivities. Even as couples broke ground by challenging the gendered roles typical of early parenthood through men’s leave-taking, they felt and reproduced the moral weight attached to mothers’ caregiving as they allocated leave time. Moreover, men’s actual experience of their time with baby, and how they decided their involvement in domestic work, ultimately depended on how participants interpreted cultural
expectations about men and women’s proper roles in families. Nevertheless, in this chapter I argue that the transformative potential of fathers’ leave-taking should not be dismissed. Even “slow drippings of change” (Sullivan 2006: 15-16) represent an unsettling of gendered parenting that can contribute to shifting cultural attitudes surrounding family roles over time. The key is recognizing and properly theorizing the tensions between convention and change in family interactions. In this study, it was fathers’ strong attachments to their children and the development of ‘caring consciousness’—a way of thinking that emerges when men come to be practiced in, and feel accountable for, their parenting— that could lead to reflection on, and renegotiation of, caring roles and responsibilities (see Philip 2014: 231). Although changes to couples’ gendered roles and fathers’ identities are important in resisting the gender order and reshaping cultural configurations of acceptable masculinity, I caution that men’s involvement in family life can unintentionally constrain women and contribute to the reproduction of gender inequality if fathers’ caregiving is placed on a pedestal. Future research should therefore be careful to apply a feminist lens in investigating the contexts which can further encourage men and women to negotiate the bumpy terrain of changing family life.
Chapter 2
Negotiating Fathers’ Parental Leave

2.1 Introduction

More than two decades ago sociologist Arlie Hochschild (1989: 4) identified a problem she termed the “stalled revolution.” As women entered the workforce in unprecedented numbers, making dual-income families the norm, neither workplaces nor the state kept pace, leaving families to absorb the shock of rapid social changes. With minimal support, many families are still struggling to find ways to accomplish the work traditionally done by an at-home mother. Although gendered divisions of work tend to be the “path of least resistance” for dual-earner couples once they become parents (Cowan & Cowan 1992; Fox 2009; Ornstein & Stalker 2013; Walzer 1998), the allocation of domestic responsibility can be contentious. In the absence of large-scale social transformation, the interactional processes and struggles that ultimately lead to less gendered parenting arrangements are seldom examined, however (Sullivan 2004). It is important to pay attention to the routine tensions couples experience as they juggle employment and family responsibilities because these may indicate fracture points that can ultimately lead to an unsettling of conventional arrangements (Sullivan 2004; see also Connell 2005; Deutsch 2007).

As one such site of negotiation, studying couples who shared parental leave presents the opportunity to explore decision-making processes that may challenge the gendered care arrangements typical of early parenthood. By giving new parents the opportunity to spend time caring for their infants, leave schemes are one way the state helps families reconcile the often incompatible demands of work and family. When made available to both mothers and fathers (as opposed to maternity leave), these policies have the potential to reduce gendered divisions of paid and unpaid labour. The goal behind highly-praised non-transferable leave policies is to counteract the cultural and economic pressures that would otherwise coerce fathers to relinquish any leave entitlement to mothers by specifically setting aside time for men (Ray, Gornick & Schmitt 2010; Risman 1998; Singley & Hynes 2005). In contrast, gender-neutral leave schemes make fathers’ caregiving a matter of family negotiation rather than state interest (Caragata & Miller 2008).
As a nation with two separate parental leave policies, Canada represents both types of approaches. Whereas the Quebec Parental Insurance Plan (QPIP) designates three to five weeks of non-transferable leave to fathers, in the rest of Canada the thirty-five weeks of parental leave is gender-neutral and administered under the Employment Insurance (EI) program. With no default for fathers’ leave-taking, whether and how parental leave is shared is at couple’s discretion outside Quebec. Yet because gender-neutral policies tend to be underused by men (Brandth & Kvande 2009; O’Brien 2009; Haas 1992), little attention has been paid to the way couples negotiate the early days and months of parenthood. If parental leave is commonly treated as maternity leave, what leads some couples to share this time? Given the persistently gendered nature of leave-use in Canada (Marshall 2008; Caragata & Miller 2008) it is important to understand the circumstances and motivations influencing the decision to share leave, as well as how these factors are given weight within the couple context. Moreover, because Canadian fathers’ leave-use comes out of the parental entitlement, which necessarily reduces the amount of time available to their spouse, exploring how couples decide to allocate leave time to fathers can reveal more about the micro-level workings of social change than focusing on men who take advantage of leave-time that policy sets aside for them.

Drawing on interviews with thirty-three couples who shared parental leave, in this paper I demonstrate that the allocation of parental leave amongst Canadian couples is not simply an individual battle between ‘his’ wishes and ‘her’ final say (Almqvist, Sandberg & Dahlgren 2011; McKay & Doucet 2010; Sundstrom & Duvander 2002), but a joint micro-level negotiation confronting hegemonic cultural assumptions about the primacy of women’s caregiving and the mother-infant bond. Despite the prevalence of shared parenting in the sample, without a strong social mandate or moral support for men’s involvement with their young children, analyzing participants’ accounts of their decision-making reveals a distinct prioritization of mothers’ time with baby. As I will argue however, material circumstances, such as a man’s topped-up earnings or a woman’s career, can help balance the scales in favour of more equal sharing of parental leave.

2.2 Literature Review

Investigations into men’s leave-use have been dominated by European scholars because of their pioneering policy developments and high usage rates, especially in the Nordic region. Although
policy creates a context in which couples must make decisions about how to use parental leave, parental assessments of feasibility and desirability shape the arrangements couples choose. Investigations into reasons for – and against – taking leave have centered on two key decision making factors: employment conditions and individual attitudes.

Fathers’ tendency to use less parental leave is typically attributed to economics, whereby couples decide that they cannot “afford” to have fathers stay home given families’ dependence on men’s higher incomes (Almqvist 2008; Haas 2003). Fathers who perceive economic disadvantages to taking paid parental leave take fewer days of leave than other fathers (Haas, Allard, & Hwang 2002). Workplace factors also affect whether and how long fathers take parental leave (Haas 1992; Haas et al. 2002; Hobson Duvander, & Halldén 2006). Bygren and Duvander (2006) report that fathers felt comfortable making use of leave policies when others in the firm had already done so. Further, those who worked in the public sector or larger companies were more likely to use parental leave than fathers in the private sector or in small firms, where a higher degree of ostracism was expected. Organization culture of the workplace matters, with men’s leave-use significantly affected by the amount of managerial support for active fathering and the presence of a long work-hours norm (Haas et al. 2002).

Fathers’ gender identities and ideas about proper family roles also shape couple’s decisions regarding infant care. Karu and Kasearu (2011) suggest that generous leave policies in Estonia, for instance, remain largely unused because men hold themselves accountable to entrenched gendered beliefs linking fatherhood with breadwinning (see also Pajumets 2010). Comparing France and Sweden, Almqvist (2008) reports that whether couples negotiate parental leave depends on fathers’ attachment to cultural ideals of conventional masculinity. Quantitative studies find that men who hold egalitarian beliefs are more likely to take leave and take it for a longer (Duvander 2014; Seward, Yeatts, Zottarelli & Fletcher 2006), yet the meanings behind leave-taking can be ambiguous or contrived. Chronholm (2002) for instance, identified both the desire for a close relationship with one’s child and to achieve greater gender equality as motivations for fathers’ leave-taking in Sweden. While all British fathers she interviewed used the language of “participatory fathering,” Dermott (2001: 161) cautions that it is a mistake to infer from limited statements about a desire for involvement that all fathers translate this into the same behaviour. And Lammi-Taskula (2008: 145) warns that fathers’ involvement does not
necessarily challenge a prevailing mother-care culture as contradictory ideology and practice may coexist.

Any consideration of individual motivations must thus also include attention to local contexts – especially child-rearing patterns and family policies (McKay, Marshall & Doucet 2012; Kamerman & Moss 2009). Because household responsibilities are often negotiated and reproduced implicitly along gendered lines (Lammi-Taskula 2008; Risman 1998), it is important to make these processes visible even when parenting arrangements seem progressive. Yet there has been less attention to couple-level interactions in countries where leave time is not reserved for fathers. When the allocation of parental leave must be negotiated – because of gender-neutral leave policy or none at all – it is important to consider how couples balance each spouse’s ideals and the structural resources and barriers they face (Moen and Wethington 1992; see also Hochschild 1989). In Australia, for instance, men’s leave-taking was less likely if their partners chose to exit paid employment, or where there was more than one child in the family (Whitehouse, Diamond & Baird 2007: 401). Singley and Hynes (2005) found that in the United States, conventional arrangements are the norm because unpaid leave combined with gendered labour market conditions means that being away from work would be prohibitive for families relying on fathers’ health insurance or higher salary. Other American studies have confirmed that family circumstances are critical in shaping men’s fathering of older children (Sullivan & Smithson 2007; Raley, Bianchi & Wang 2012; Chesley 2011).

This “logic of gendered choices” (Risman 1998: 29) has also been demonstrated in Canada, where one of the major findings has been men’s reluctance to take parental leave that would otherwise go to their spouse (McKay & Doucet 2010; Rehel 2014). Without designated leave time for them, McKay & Doucet (2010: 307) suggest that policy constraints intersect with deeply gendered ideas about caregiving resulting in fathers seeing only individual entitlement leave, such as vacation time, sick days, or employer-paid time off, as their own. It is not clear from this research, however, whether the men interviewed used official parental leave, and if so under which program, given the study spanned two separate policies with quite different provisions (EI in Canada and QPIP in Quebec). By treating their sample as homogenous, the authors preclude consideration of whether couples can use fathers’ parental leave in less gendered ways. Other Canadian research identifies the practices of fathers who challenge conventional care arrangements of early parenthood: Ranson (2012), for instance, notes the significance of
flexibility afforded by non-standard work in her research on men who have made adjustments to their paid employment in order to accommodate their family life, including taking parental leave. And Rehel (2014: 120) found that setting aside time for paternity leave is crucial to shifting gender dynamics towards equality because not wanting to reduce the time available to mothers is a unique constraint on fathers’ leave-taking. An emphasis on changing structural conditions alone, however, glosses over gendered dynamics shaping fathers’ involvement within families.

Women’s influence – in terms of earning power and ideas about gender equality – is central to the decision for fathers to become actively involved in caring for children (Doucet and Merla 2007: 469). Thus this study extends recent findings on the importance of examining father involvement in the context of practices and attitudes of both spouses (Doucet 2009; Bulanda 2004; Cook, Jones, Dick, & Singh 2005; Fagan & Barnett 2003) to focus on the first year parenthood. Bringing to light the unobserved and unnoticed practices and understandings involved in the division of parental responsibility was the impetus behind this research. Rather than simply viewing men who take parental leave as the bearers of a progressive fatherhood, it is necessary to consider how the parenting practices that couples choose emerge from interactions that are shaped by larger structural and cultural forces. By treating parental leave as a site of negotiation, this study illuminates how each spouse’s desires and constraints are weighed and balanced, as well as what the points of consensus and conflict in couples’ negotiations reveal about the persistently gendered nature of childcare and the potential for future change.

2.3 Data and Methods

As part of a larger project examining fathers’ leave-taking, I conducted interviews in 2014 with 33 Canadian couples in which men took at least six weeks of parental leave under the federal government’s Employment Insurance program. Provided they have worked a minimum of 600 hours in the year preceding their claim, this plan entitles biological mothers to 15 weeks of paid leave with a further 35 available to either parent, remunerated at 55 percent of previous salary (to a maximum yearly payout of $26,730 in 2014). Because fathers’ leave must come out of this allotment, six weeks was selected as the minimum time at home in order to explore the family-level negotiations that occur when women’s entitlement is significantly reduced. As federal policy evaluations ask only mothers to select from a set of predetermined options to account for why their spouses did not file for paid benefits (McKay & Doucet 2010), there is wide
application in hearing from men themselves about when and why they did take official parental leave, as well as couple’s accounts of how this decision was made.

Participants were recruited through postings on neighbourhood groups on Facebook and online discussion (parenting-related and more general) forums with a high presence of Southern Ontarians. In order to participate, fathers had to be cohabiting with their partners, willing to participate in a joint interview, and have taken EI parental leave for at least six weeks within the last three years. The resulting sample consisted of 31 heterosexual married couples and two common law ones, all living within an hour of the Toronto area. Most couples were firmly in the upper middle-class based on occupation, income and education levels. Household incomes ranged from $50,000 to $260,000, with an average combined salary of $163,000. This included two single income families where the men were once employed but currently stay-at-home fathers. In nine other couples, the wives were the primary breadwinners, defined here as earning at least sixty percent more than their husbands (Tichenor 1999). Those with lower education levels were found almost exclusively amongst the lower earners. One father had only a high school degree, three of the men and one of the women had attempted some college or university, and another three men and one woman had received their college diplomas. Nine of the men and 13 of the women had Bachelor’s degrees, and 17 of the men and 18 of the women had graduate or professional school degrees. The average age for both mothers and fathers in this study was 36. Finally, seven participants were visible minorities and the remainder were Caucasian.

As displayed in table 1, fathers’ leave-taking was distributed across three variables: the length of leave, if it was taken as primary caregiver, and how it was remunerated. In total, 12 fathers took long leaves of six months or more, 16 took medium leaves between three to six months, and five fathers took short leaves of less than three months. Twenty-three of the fathers took leave as solo caregivers, while ten were on leave with their spouse. Finally, 13 of the men were paid by EI only compared to 20 that received an employer top-up. The majority of those with benefits (12/20) worked directly for the provincial or federal government, with top-ups to 93% of their salary for up to 17 or 37 weeks, respectively. The three education workers in the sample received 100% top up for six weeks, and private or non-governmental organization top-ups ranged from six to 37 weeks at 75-85%. Appendix B provides further information about the couples in this study.
Table 1: Distribution of Fathers’ Leave-taking

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Long ≥ 6 months</th>
<th>Medium 3-6 months</th>
<th>Short ≤ 3 months</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N = 12</td>
<td>N = 16</td>
<td>N = 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solo Caregiver With</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouse</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top-Up</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Couples participated in a joint interview lasting between 1.5-2.5 hours, usually in participants’ homes. Interviews were semi-structured, based on a schedule of 50-60 open-ended questions asking both spouses about the decision making process, their leave experiences, ideas about parenting, and reflections on sharing parental leave. During this time, couples also completed an interactive activity in which they were asked to jointly rank the factors that influenced their sharing of leave (see Doucet 1996). I also met with fathers for a 45-90 minute follow-up interview three to four weeks later in order to elaborate on their motivations for, and experiences of, leave-taking, as well as anything else they may not have wanted to discuss with their spouse present. This combination of methods approximated the conditions of daily family life by providing a context for lively discussion and joint meaning-making. Seeing how couples both narrate and handle occasions of consensus and conflict in situ enabled observation of some practices directly, as well as allowing some analytical purchase on the credibility of participants’ accounts of practices (Polack & Green 2016). Rather than a cohesive couple’s story (Hertz 1995), the interactive methods elicited lively discussion as well as opportunities for participant reflexivity, through occasions of consensus and conflict (see Heaphy & Einarsdottir 2012; Valentine 1999). The post-hoc individual and joint narratives of leave-allocation that emerged are the data upon which this paper is based.

All interviews were audiotaped and later transcribed. Following recommendations in Kvale (1996), transcription did not include every pause or verbal mannerism, but was otherwise verbatim. Interviews were manually coded and analyzed followed the principles of grounded
theory and saturation outlined by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Initial analysis involved immersing myself in the data and developing a series of open codes reflecting the themes that emerged repeatedly. Through constant comparison and sorting these were later developed into the more focused categories of analysis and theoretical insights presented here. An ongoing process of reflexivity through careful memoing enabled scrutiny of the research process. This ensured the arguments presented in this paper, though informed by the researcher’s interests and disciplinary perspectives (Charmaz 2014), are grounded in participants’ understandings and experiences.

2.4 Findings

In contrast to previous Canadian (McKay & Doucet 2010) and international (Almqvist 2008; Whitehouse, Diamond & Baird 2007; Lammi-Taskula 2006) research, what stood out amongst this sample of official leave-takers was how rarely mothers were identified as decision-makers. Rather, participants framed the decision to share leave as being jointly made, while simultaneously privileging mothers’ prerogative. With only two of the 33 fathers suggesting their spouse had unfairly determined the allocation of parental leave, it is important to understand how consensus was achieved for the remainder of the couples. Participants’ narratives revealed little negotiating because deeply embedded cultural ideas about proper roles led both parents to prioritize mothers’ time with baby, according to two configurations: 18 couples decided to divide the time based on fathers’ interests in leave-taking, whereas 15 pairs were pushed to share by their circumstances. Table 2, below, gives an overview of these mother-centric patterns to be discussed in detail below.

2.4.1 Intentional Leave-Taking: Fathers’ Ideals and Desires

By individual and couple accounts, more than half (n=18) of participants’ time with baby was based on their personal desires, although the decision to take parental leave was not always easily made. The most common pattern was for fathers to take medium leaves of between three to six months as solo caregivers, with ten of the 18 men in this group doing so. Two fathers took long solo leaves equal to their wives’ time with the baby, whereas leaves of three months or less tended to be taken at the same time as their spouse. In this section, fathers’ desires, what the women wanted, and how these potentially competing interests were negotiated, will be discussed.
Table 2: Fathers’ Leave-Use Summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Intentional Leave-takers</th>
<th></th>
<th>Circumstantial Leave-takers</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n = 18</td>
<td></td>
<td>n = 15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fathers’ motivation for leave taking:</td>
<td>Desire to be at home:</td>
<td></td>
<td>Couple’s circumstances:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- 15 wanted to spend time with baby</td>
<td></td>
<td>- 6 Mothers ineligible</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- 3 took advantage of the unique opportunity to be off work</td>
<td></td>
<td>- 2 Mothers needed support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- 7 Father’s top-ups</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couples’ divisions of leave:</td>
<td>2/18 Wanted to share equally</td>
<td></td>
<td>Largely unnecessary because leave allocation was a pragmatic solution to couple’s financial and employment circumstances</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10/18 Agreed to time wife allotted</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6/18 Entered into gendered negotiations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negotiations:</td>
<td>Largely unnecessary because couples jointly supported the idea of maternal entitlement to time with baby, whereas fathers’ leave-taking was seen a ‘bonus’</td>
<td></td>
<td>Largely unnecessary because leave allocation was a pragmatic solution to couple’s financial and employment circumstances</td>
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<tr>
<td>Weight of Gendered Expectations:</td>
<td>- Most men felt lucky to get a portion of the time and in turn gladly endorsed their wives’ preferences</td>
<td></td>
<td>- Men tended to be uneasy taking women’s leave time - if eligible mothers retained the right of first refusal</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Even fathers who insisted on their fair share ended up collaborating to reduce their time at home unless the woman was committed to sharing or her career pulled her back to work</td>
<td></td>
<td>- Men’s top ups were only persuasive when women were already less committed to taking leave</td>
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<tr>
<td>Balancing the scales:</td>
<td>Women’s attachment to their careers can encourage their early return to work and thus longer leaves for men</td>
<td></td>
<td>Access to top-ups offers an alternative to the default of maternal caregiving, especially if women were pushed or pulled back to paid work</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Stronger cultural support for fathers as caregivers can loosen the default association of mothers as primary parent that tip leave negotiations in favour of maternal caregiving</td>
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For 15 of the intentional leave-takers, wanting to take leave was explained by the importance placed on bonding. Whether alone (n=13) or with their partners (n=2), participants reported that they were excited to spend time getting to know and learning to care for their babies:
Shawn: I guess a chance to be with the first-born child, like just really interested in my baby and being there with him. [4 month solo leave]

Reuben: I just really wanted the time to, I guess, connect and be with her as much as I could. [5 month solo leave]

Daniel: To bond, to have that alone time. To be put in that situation where you can't focus on something else. I take over when my wife’s at home but it’s not the same thing. [3.5 month solo leave]

Because motivations were overwhelmingly personal rather than ideological, a desire to be involved in infant care, however, could be trumped by gendered norms. Three men in this group, for instance, would have defaulted to mothers as caregivers had it not been for the unique opportunity parental leave offered – to be off work, travel as a family, or prove to one’s wife he could “cut it” as primary parent. In each case, caregiving was shared equally between spouses so these were not families with conventional parenting arrangements. Yet aside from their individual plans to capitalize on the leave opportunity, the couples simply took for granted that the women would be primary caregivers, a common theme amongst participants.

Aside from two reluctant sharers, the wives of the intentional leave-takers embraced the idea of their husbands’ leave-taking. From their accounts, most of the women thought it was only “fair” that their spouses be allotted some of the time, with some specifically making the connection between developing men’s competency with babies and the expectation of joint responsibility:

Dara: I would talk to other moms and I remember they would say, “My husband can’t get my son or daughter down for a nap,” and I’m just like, oh my god. First of all, who wants to be chained to the kid all of the time? Not me, so you need your husband to be able to do it too. Secondly, I really do feel like, when we talk about housework too, both of us—he’s just as responsible as I am. He’s just as capable as I am. He’s a wonderful dad so it was never even—it’s like of course he would have 50% of the responsibility. [Husband took 3.5 month solo leave]

Often the decision to share parental leave arrangement was seen as a good fit between mothers’ assumptions that they would not want to be home for the full year and fathers’ desire to bond with their babies. Yet it was not uncommon to hear that the women had wavered as they neared the end of their leaves or prepared to share for a second child. In the end, only two out of the 18 women in this group placed as much weight on their husband’s time with baby as their own. The rest of the mothers were not just reluctant to give up time off work; they could not dismiss the niggling feeling that they “should” be the ones at home – whether as compensation for the challenges experienced through pregnancy, labour, and the “100 days of hell” of the first three
months of infant care, or because of the importance placed on maternal caregiving. Taking what was understood to be women’s leave time also did not sit well with many of the men. Thus for ten of the 18 couples in this group, conflict was jointly avoided: The men felt lucky to get a portion of the time both spouses agreed was more rightfully hers to use, and in turn endorsed their wives’ preferences (fathers’ average leave = 3.5 months). For Reuben, for example, this meant waiting to begin primary care of his daughter until his wife Rebecca felt “she wasn't this fragile little thing that only needed her momma.” While two couples were mutually committed to dividing the year equally (fathers’ average leave = 5.8 months), the remaining six pairs had to manage competing ideas about how to best allocate the time because fathers challenged the idea of parental leave as maternity leave.

Of the couples who entered negotiations, the only time a father’s desire outweighed his spouse’s was when the women could not fully deny the men’s leave-taking. In two cases, for this reason, women granted their partners a minimal amount of time (six weeks). These instances of maternal gatekeeping (Allen & Hawkins 1999) contrast with the experiences of the remaining four couples who collaborated to extend or reduce men’s leaves according to the woman’s prerogative: When a mother’s career took precedence over her feelings of leave-entitlement, husbands’ time at home was extended (average leave = 5.8 months). But if her career was not a factor, couples agreed to reduce fathers’ share of the leave (average leave = 4.3 months). Despite wanting half of the time, the men ended up agreeing that allocating their wives seven to eight months “made sense” given the couples’ mutual desire to promote breastfeeding and how this coincided with the women’s work calendars. Although a few fathers challenged the idea of mothers as superior caregivers, they were not prepared to question the cultural directive “breast is best” which was understood to be “innate, essential, eternal and non-negotiable” amongst participants (Cronon 1995: 36; see also Wall 2001; Doucet 2009):

Justin: The day I could feed Jamie with the bottle, I was like, ”Yes, we're equals!” Except [to wife] you still obviously were needed to give her the good stuff. My opinion is that the mother, assuming they're breastfeeding, I think that's, for me that's a big thing. The logistics of that is just such that I think she's entitled to have more access to the kid, to give the kid the best quality nourishment possible. [5.5 month solo-leave]

In summary, although all the couples in this group embraced the idea of shared parenting, most did not conceive of mothers and fathers as interchangeable. This is why, instead of bargaining for
leave time, participants deliberated about the ‘right way’ to divide it. More powerful than any material or social resources buttressing a man’s bid for more time at home was the moral weight of motherhood (Oliker 2011; DeVault 1991; Walzer 1998). Thus extending fathers’ leaves beyond three to four months “made sense” only when both spouses were committed to sharing, or if a woman’s career drew her back to work before the first year was over. In contrast to previous Canadian literature (McKay & Doucet 2010; Rehel 2014) which posits fathers’ parental leave use as an individual negotiation in which women’s wishes were prioritized, this research suggests that bargaining is largely redundant when parents jointly frame leave allocation as a moral decision. With strong social support for mothers’, but not fathers’ time with baby, the scales were tipped towards maternal caregiving when leave sharing was motivated by fathers’ personal desires.

2.4.2 Circumstantial Leave Taking: Financial Incentives and Stepping Up

While some couples decided to share parental leave because of fathers’ interest in infant care, for the second group of men (n = 15) this desire was either less clear or altogether absent. From their accounts, seven fathers would clearly not have taken parental leave had their circumstances not pushed them to be at home. The other eight men in this group had some interest in caregiving, but also recognized that the outcome hinged on their particular situations. Yet rather than the result of a pragmatic cost-benefit analysis, fathers’ leave-taking remained mother-centred for the circumstantial leave-takers, occurring only when: a woman was ineligible for EI, she needed emotional or practical support, or a man’s topped-up benefits bolstered her early return to work.

Only five couples in this study strayed from the pattern of six months or less for the men, taking leaves of eight to ten months because their partners were ineligible. There were two different configurations of leave use: First, for couples where the wife had a low income, there was little financial incentive for her to return to work so both parents stayed home together (fathers’ average leave = 9 months). Of course removing the husband from the labour market could be risky for pairs already depending on one salary, but three were determined not to ‘waste’ a paid leave opportunity. Whereas one family cut back significantly on their expenses to manage having both parents at home, access to an employer top-up meant “there couldn’t be a conflict” for the other two. As Trevor explained: “Someone was offering me basically more money after tax than I was getting before, and I could stay home.” Amongst this group, fathers’ leave-taking was seen as an opportunity and not an entitlement: none of these participants would have considered using the
benefits had their spouses been eligible – unless her unpaid time-off was feasible. The way these couples narrated their decision-making made it clear that fathers’ leave-taking was seen as a bonus; the priority was ensuring mother’s year with the baby.

Second, when the wives of circumstantial leave-takers earned significantly more than their husbands, the women took a short leave of two to four months and then returned to work while the men became primary caregivers (fathers’ average leave = 8.8 months). As one father explained, “For me it wasn’t, I want to take the time off. For me, it made sense to take the time off. Not that I didn’t enjoy it. I loved it and it was the best 10 months of my life.” Yet even after feeling that they had developed unique and strong bonds with their children, neither of the fathers in this group felt entitled to any subsequent leave time. Moreover, the men seemed uneasy with their non-conformity to conventional parenting roles:

Len: I felt bad for Laura. So when he started saying Dada first, I almost stopped him. I wanted him to say, “Mama,” so at least it wouldn’t be like you come home and he says, “Dada,” first. It was like, “Oh great, see what happens when I go back to work? He says Daddy.” So I was like, “Mama, Mama.” I was trying to get that to be his first word. So I felt bad. [9 month solo leave]

Though many couples reserved tasks for fathers in the evenings because they had been away from the child all day, none of the mothers suggested their husbands might feel badly about missing out on time with baby. Fathers’ paid work was treated as a given while mothers’ was not, and was thus something to feel guilty about. That some women were positioned as primary parents despite – or perhaps because of – the lesser amount of caregiving they took on indicates the strength of gendered parenting norms couples had to manage.

The gendered “shoulds” of parenting took a backseat however when fathers took parental leave because their wives needed support (average 4.2 months). For instance, Rina was “close to postpartum depression,” trying to balance motherhood and entrepreneurship, so taking a second parental leave when their daughter was ten months old was a decision that her husband Rob felt he “had to make”. Similarly, Luke, a credit analyst, took a six-month leave after his wife Leanne, a paramedic, developed debilitating postpartum anxiety and was urged to return to work:

Luke: It kind of had to be done. She was a mess. It was just not a good situation. She was just upset so much of the time that basically I had to step up because I was worried about her. I was worried about my son. And I wasn’t going to let the house fall apart. [6 month solo leave]
According to their accounts, both couples had fairly even divisions of housework and childcare, yet until these stumbling blocks, had simply assumed the women would be the ones at home taking care of baby. Conventional assumptions prioritizing mother-care during the first year can thus exist alongside more egalitarian distributions of household work, an inconsistency which may only become evident when couples’ default gendered leave plans are derailed.

In contrast to the unease felt by fathers when their spouse was ineligible for parental leave, being unable to fulfill conventional parenting scripts made the question of mothers’ entitlement a moot point. The availability of employer benefits on top of the fifty-five percent offered by the federal EI program, however, could also have the same effect:

Erik: When I got the job and we realized that I had better benefits and top-up than she did then we realized that, okay, even though [to Eva] yours [leave time] got shorter than you would have liked, it just was tough at the time. We just bought the house; we’d done lots of renovations. It became a financial decision at the time and also, as we said, it was the start of the school year, so it made sense. [6.5 month solo leave]

When topped-up leave time is regarded as workplace entitlement – such as vacation time or supplemental health benefits – it can change the way couples come to think about leave allocation. Consider Ethan’s response to being asked the reason he took leave, for instance: “Oh wow, that’s hard. That’s a hard one. Altruistically, I wanted to. I really felt like that would be good. Whether that trumped the ‘because I could,’ I don’t know.” Access to top-ups transformed fathers’ parental leave from an uneasy break with convention into an opportunity to capitalize on:

Paul: Most of my exposure is to other people with my benefits obviously; like they’re my coworkers. I know very few women with a year of top-up. Almost everyone’s top up has run out by that point and so, of course the men have four months at 93% of their salary, so it just makes sense. [4 month solo leave]

Immersed in a world where maximizing available top-ups by having each parent take a solo leave was what “made sense,” conventional parenting roles no longer served as the default. Suggesting that the question of entitlement only “comes from people who aren’t getting benefits,” Patricia agreed “it would be stupid” to give up their employer top-ups, demonstrating how there can be a different logic at work when finances come to overshadow gendered parenting norms.

Although almost half the couples in this study commonly referenced the economics (rather than ideals) underlying their decision-making, their leave allocations were not simply the result of
financial calculation, however. Men’s top-ups were persuasive only when the women were already less committed to taking leave – because of dedication to a career or disinterest in being home. Above all, mothers retained the right of first refusal. While necessity was the mother of unconventional leave configurations, having finances on his side did help lessen the cultural weight placed on maternal caregiving in two ways: First, access to husband’s employer top-up provided the incentive to steer away from the “logic of gendered choices” channeling couples towards conventional practices (Risman 1998: 29). Without these benefits, fathers’ primary caregiving would not have “made sense” to couples in this group. Second, when a breadwinning woman was ineligible for leave, financial considerations made fathers’ leave-taking a pragmatic option even for those who had no interest in shared caregiving. Thus material circumstances can compel couples who would default to convention to enact less gendered parenting arrangements.

2.5 Conclusions

By sampling according to Canadian fathers’ official leave-use, this study sheds light on the ‘successful’ negotiations of parental leave sharing. Previous Canadian research (McKay & Doucet 2010) found that leave allocations were “mother-led,” with men predominantly taking time off work directly after a child’s birth alongside their spouse, unless the woman wanted to return to work before the end of the first year. Yet this pattern largely reflects fathers’ use of individual entitlements and thus offers little insight into how couples come to share official leave time. If the division of care work at home is critical for imagining a future of gender equality, then research on the processes by which fathers become more involved in caregiving is key (Oliker 2011).

Analyzing participants’ narratives reveals two patterns: just over half of the sample (n=18) was motivated by their individual desire to be at home, whereas the rest (n=15) were compelled by their circumstances to take a leave they may or may not have been interested in. Whereas Holter (2007) posits similar categories to account for the shift in parenting ideals amongst his sample of European men working part-time, the current study cautions that theorizing social change must go beyond the level of rhetoric. Examining actual parenting practices reveals that men’s involvement in caregiving is not independently determined – decisions were jointly-made from within highly-gendered social and cultural locations. The fact that even couples who shared parental leave still consistently refer to cultural expectations of mothers as caregivers makes clear how central beliefs about proper roles were to the parenting arrangements couples adopted.
in the first year. In contrast, by their accounts, none of the participants felt pressured by the “shoulds” of fathers’ involvement (Williams 2008; Knijn 1995). Although leave allocation tended to privilege maternal caregiving, this study demonstrates how gendered parenting patterns were at the same time unsettled (Deutsch 2007; Sullivan 2004) through men’s practical commitment to spend time with their infants, or the circumstances that pushed them to do so.

Rather than reflecting “new men” committed to gender equality (Holter 2007), over half the fathers in this study took leave because of their personal desire to be involved with their children. These intentional leave-takers ended up with four months or less – not because the men deferred to their spouse’s individual preferences (Sundstrom & Duvander 2002; McKay & Doucet 2010) – but because couples jointly championed the cultural idea of maternal caregiving (average leave = 3.5 months). Negotiations, however, could lead to less gendered arrangements: When the men would not relent, two reluctant-to-share mothers surrendered a minimal amount of time (average leave = 1.5 months), whereas other fathers pushed for a more equal division (average leave = 4.3 months). Couples only came close to dividing the leave evenly, however, when both partners were ideologically committed to sharing (fathers’ average leave = 5.8 months) or a woman’s career drew her back to work (fathers’ average leave = 5.8 months). With men’s desires subsumed to a larger moral parenting imperative, it took women’s career attachment or a mutual commitment to equality not to succumb to the pressure of cultural norms.

Circumstantial leave-takers too wanted to uphold mothers’ right to time with baby despite averaging more time at home (5.9 months). The more couples felt they “had to” share the time because of circumstances, however, the less conventional norms influenced their parenting arrangements. If women’s leave-taking was unmanageable, for instance, whether due to ineligibility (fathers’ average leave = 7.7 months) or difficulty coping (fathers’ average leave = 5.5 months), fathers became the default leave-taker. When eligible for federal parental leave, women retained the right of first refusal, yet a man’s salary top-up could be a game-changer (fathers’ average leave = 5.4 months). Having access to employer benefits reduced the normative appeal of gendered care arrangements by introducing a financial logic to parental leave allocation. Although economics did not displace gendered norms, when paired with a woman’s career attachment, having finances on fathers’ side helped establish a pragmatic approach to dividing the time that reduced couples’ stake in conventional roles.
Whether based on men’s interest or family circumstances, the couples in this study demonstrate that leave-taking remains gendered even when fathers use official policies, yet they also reveal the interactions that contribute to the slow but incremental (Sullivan 2004) social changes that are occurring within families (Milan, Keown & Urquijo 2016; Bianchi, Milkie, Sayer & Robinson 2012). Men’s interest in shared caregiving is an important first step – but it gains strength from a woman’s commitment to work or a couple’s joint egalitarian approach to childcare. Thus the availability of a national parental leave policy enabling fathers’ time at home is an essential, if not sufficient, condition towards getting fathers involved early on. For those men without a clearly defined interest in leave-taking, gender-neutral policy is not enough. Maternal caregiving will remain the default unless economic incentives, whether through government or workplace initiatives, help displace normative gender expectations with financial logic. In this study, having access to an employer top-up helped lessen the weight of cultural or economic arrangements that dissuaded fathers’ caregiving, although extended leave time was only granted to fathers if a mother was drawn back to her education or career before the end of the first year. Thus women’s strong position in the labour market can also help tip the scales in favour of more equal sharing of parental leave.

Lastly, increased cultural recognition of the importance of fathers’ caregiving is crucial because the strength of social norms surrounding maternal caregiving was the major stumbling block couples encountered. Without strong social support for their involvement, this research makes it clear that fathers’ leave-taking remains very much an individual decision, compared to the moral weight placed on mothers’ care. Targeting men through designated leave-time presumes fathers’ time at home is enough to promote gender equality (Rehel 2014; O’Brien 2009). Yet the default association of mothers as primary parents commonly referenced by participants and the discomfort some couples experienced with unconventional arrangements indicate that men’s leave-taking does not simply neutralize gendered norms. Cultural schemas shape the weight that individuals’ beliefs and resources assume in interactions between partners (Oliker 2011). Although government or workplace incentives can help draw more men into leave-taking, increased exposure to fathers as competent and nurturing infant caregivers through public policy campaigns is necessary to disrupt the hegemony of maternal caregiving which loomed large amongst participants. As one father articulated: “Before you can buy into it, you have to be exposed to it. But nobody, nobody presents the message. No one presents the message that you
cannot be a full human being until you've raised a child.” Analyzing couples’ accounts of parental-leave allocation makes it clear that only with increased economic and cultural support can families get the footing needed to better navigate the gendered boundaries holding them back from pursuing fathers’ leave-taking as an ideal or work-family balancing strategy.
Chapter 3
Fathers’ Leave-taking and the Development of Caring Masculinities

3.1 Introduction

The image of the new father who is deeply engaged in hands-on caregiving has received much attention in the public eye and academic literature over the last thirty years. The assumption is that when men combine work and family in ways that challenge the centrality of earning (Ranson 2012; Brandth & Kvande 2016) it is inevitable that some personal and social shuffling will occur (Doucet 2006: 237). The transformative potential of this process has been examined by researchers engaging with David Morgan’s (1992) call to study masculinity by examining situations where it may be on the line – such as when men face unemployment (Shirani, Henwood & Coltart 2012b; Chesley 2011), reduce their work commitments (Ranson 2012; Holter 2007), work at home (Halford 2006; Craig, Powell & Cortis 2012), or become stay-at-home parents (Solomon 2014; Chesley 2011). The findings from the literature are mixed, centering on whether men with non-normative relations to paid work reproduce or challenge hegemonic masculinity – the culturally celebrated configuration of masculine practice that legitimizes men’s dominant position in society (Connell 2005; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). This conceptualization, however, limits the ability to think about men’s subjective masculinities, experiences, practices, and possibilities for change (Seidler 2006: 12; Hanlon 2012).

Contemporary theorists of masculinity identify caregiving as a critical locus of change because doing this kind of work requires men to enact feminine values of care such as positive emotion, interdependence, and relationality (Elliott 2016). Adopting the socially subordinated status of caregiver can be resistance to inequality if it means giving up the privileges of hegemonic masculinity and risking social ostracism by not conforming to expected masculine roles (Elliott 2016; Hanlon 2012; Kimmel 2010). How the lived, affective lives of men interact and intersect with this framework remains to be seen, however (Elliott 2016: 256). Does time spent caregiving lead all men to incorporate parenting into their identities? Under what conditions can learning and performing childcare tasks lead to a change in consciousness? How do men experience and negotiate the disjuncture between cultural standards of appropriate masculinity and the values of caregiving? These are the questions guiding the current study.
In this paper, I build on the contributions of critical studies in men and masculinity by investigating men’s experiences of, and emotional responses to, taking parental leave using insights from symbolic interactionism. Though caregiving may be experienced in highly personal terms, this perspective holds that what individuals vest their feelings of real self in is socially shaped. It is through interaction, both real and imagined – in relation to the way people think and feel they should be acting and how they anticipate others will view these actions – that individuals develop understandings of what a particular course of action means (Finch & Mason 1993). Individual men may not feel dominant or powerful in their daily lived experiences, but they do locate themselves against masculine ideals as they construct identities and practices. Considering a “moral dimension” thus recognizes the critical role of social expectations and situated experiences in shaping fathers’ subjectivities (Doucet 2006: 176; Goffman 1961; McMahon 1995).

Empirical support for the transformative effect – both personal and social – of men’s caregiving can been gleaned from research on stay-at-home fathers (Doucet 2006; Chesley 2011; Solomon 2014). Prolonged primary caregiving amongst men remains rare, however. Examining men’s experience of parental leave thus offers the broader opportunity to investigate how employed fathers integrate care practices into their masculine identities, a context that has been less studied (Brandth & Kvande 2016; Wall 2014). The unique time-bound and gender-laden circumstances of early parenthood and parental leave make this a significant site of inquiry for investigating the situational adjustment required by the intense work of infant care and how the organization of this experience may be identity-producing for fathers. Canada is an ideal place to examine this process because it is one of few OECD countries where a well-compensated gender-neutral leave policy exists (O’Brien 2009), entitling parents to a total of 35 weeks of paid employment leave after the initial 15 weeks reserved for mothers only.

Drawing on interviews with 33 Canadian couples in which fathers took statutory parental leave, this paper demonstrates the significance of both the content of parenting, and the cultural context in which it occurs, to men’s caring. I found that when deeply immersed in primary caregiving and the mental attention it requires, participants developed a thoughtful and laborious response that approximated, if not replicated, mothers’ parenting. Yet as men, they still had to engage with broader cultural forces that undercut their caregiving and took for granted their employment. Through constrained by the tenacity of gendered cultural ideals, this research makes it clear that the transformative potential of fathers’ caregiving can be realized by those who are able to
withstand social scrutiny and incorporate the practices and values of caregiving into their identities.

3.2 Literature Review

Given the opportunity, many fathers learn and perform childcare with great skill and sensitivity (Risman 1986; Chesley 2011; Doucet 2006). Yet research has shown that they do not necessarily put their masculinity “on the line” (Morgan 1992; Doucet 2006). The men in Doucet’s (2006: 196) study on primary care fathers, for instance, actively worked “to dispel the idea that they might be gay, un-masculine or not men” by emphasizing masculine qualities of their caregiving, such as promoting risk-taking, and re-framing the home as a site of self-provisioning rather than a locus of care (see also Wilson & Prior 2010). Brandth and Kvande (1998) identified similar tendencies amongst Norwegian men on parental leave who emphasized the ways in which they were different than mothers, such as teaching the child independence and taking them out into the world. They also avoided housework (Brandth & Kvande 1998; Almqvist 2008). Just taking parental leave could be framed as a masculine act. Schmidt, Reider, Zartler, Schadler & Richter (2015) found that in Austria a man’s ability to interrupt his career was viewed as courageous struggle against external constraints by both spouses. Almqvist (2008) thus cautions that a shift towards a “child-oriented masculinity,” in which fathers enjoy close relationship with their children, should not be confused with “gender-equal men.”

Although involved fathering can reinforce hegemonic masculinity, there is also evidence of men reworking their gender identities in ways that challenge conventional notions of manhood. Recent research (Solomon 2014; Wall 2014; Johansson 2011) reveals less attention to differentiating from women, and more integrating of the values and practices of care into masculine identities. In one study, attentive caregiving was framed as a source of self-worth through skill acquisition, performance of the hard work of parenting, and being needed by the child (Brandth & Kvande 2016). Because these accomplishments were also attributed to mothers, the authors suggest this may indicate an “undoing” of the gendered character of caring. Similarly, Doucet (2006), Lee and Lee (2018), and Solomon (2014) all report that taking responsibility for others profoundly changes men, who come to appreciate their ‘emotional sides’, value care work, and adopt perspectives traditionally espoused by women on the need for work-family balance.
Yet the significance of these developments in contemporary fathering remains undertheorized. A new wave of scholars suggests that this is because the concept of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1987; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005), though highly influential to critical studies of men and masculinity, overlooks the nuances of men’s experiences (Seidler 2006, Hanlon 2012). That is, conceptualizing masculinities as locked into power relations with each other “precludes a comprehensive understanding of the lived realities of men’s emotional lives” (Elliott 2016: 246) and “how men can change through processes of transforming masculinities in specific cultures, histories and traditions” (Seidler 2006: 12). Thus Elliott (2016) argues for a practice-based model of “caring masculinities,” in which the connection between doing care work and changing identities is attended to. Brandth and Kvande (2016), take up this call, finding that Norwegian men who take leave alone come to measure self-worth not in terms of the acquisition of status and resources, but against building an intimate relationship with one’s child and contributing love and security to their lives. What’s missing from their analysis however, is greater attention to the relationship between social context and subjectivity. The authors suggest that “comparative studies on the conditions for developing caring masculinities” are thus necessary (2016: 17).

Some theorists suggest simply structuring men’s transition to parenthood in ways more similar to mothers’ is enough to condition men’s greater involvement (Rehel 2014; Risman 1986; Gornick & Myers 2008), but a handful of rich empirical studies suggest that the broader cultural organization of parenting is an overlooked, yet key, aspect to how responsibility is experienced and perceived. McMahon (1995: 234), for instance, suggests that the social conditions of motherhood – laden with the belief that children’s well-being is ultimately dependent on maternal caring behaviour – evocatively link caregiving to female morality, so that shirking parental responsibility is “unthinkable” for mothers but not for fathers (see also Hanlon 2012). Shirani, Henwood & Coltart (2012) also report evidence of divergent parenting experiences. The men in their study of first-time fathers expressed confidence in their parenting abilities, seemingly insulated against the pressures around hands-on care felt more intensively by their wives. This holds true even when fathers act as principal caregivers. Doucet (2006: 184-185), for instance, found that, unlike women, stay-at-home fathers did not feel judged on the cleanliness of the house or how their children are viewed by others, though all referred in some way to the weight of social scrutiny and the pressures to be earning (see also Chesley 2011; Doucet & Merla 2007).
Though gendered cultural expectations tend to render different aspects of parenting risky for men and women in heterosexual relationships (Shirani, Henwood & Coltart 2012), caregiving can provide “moral verification” for men under certain circumstances (Doucet 2006: 206). Brandth and Kvande (2003: 75) argue, for instance, that men who take leave alone develop an awareness and appreciation of the importance of spending quantity or “slow time” with children in order to get to know them and understand their needs. For men who are at home with a spouse, on the other hand, it is mothers who read and translate the child’s needs for the father. It is in the context of a break with mother’s mediation that the father’s self-definition as a capable, independent or primary caregiver emerges, putting previous gender roles in question, in particular the idea that the mother is the natural caregiver (Wall 2014: 207). These findings are supported by research on the emergence of a “caring consciousness” in post-divorce fathers no longer able to rely on a spouse to manage caregiving (Philip 2014). And Solomon (2014) finds that over time, engaging in family work can be a source of pride, rather than shame, for stay-at-home fathers who come to see their role as supporting their wives’ successful careers.

Given that there remains scant research into what fathers do as primary parents (Brandth & Kvande 2016; Wall 2014) and even less about how men make sense of their caregiving, studying parental leave is an especially rich site for adding to this body of literature. Bringing to light the different parenting practices and understandings that emerge when conventional resources and enactments of masculinity are suspended – but not severed – has wider applicability than concentrating on caregiving men who have completely given up their breadwinner identities.

### 3.3 Data and Methods

As part of a larger project examining fathers’ leave-taking, I conducted interviews in 2014 with 33 Canadian couples in which men took at least six weeks of statutory parental leave under the Employment Insurance program. Provided they have worked a minimum of 600 hours in the year proceeding their claim, this plan entitles biological mothers to 15 weeks of paid leave, with a further 35 available to either parent, remunerated at 55 percent of previous salary (to a maximum yearly payout of $26,730 in 2014). Participants were recruited through postings on neighbourhood groups on Facebook and online discussion (parenting-related and more general) forums with a high presence of southern Ontarians. In order to participate, fathers had to be cohabiting with their partners, willing to participate in a joint interview, and have taken EI
parental leave for at least six weeks within the last three years. This was selected as the minimum
time at home in order to narrow down the sample to fathers who were home beyond the initial
stress and chaos of the post-birth period to when parenting styles and routines begin to develop.

The resulting sample consisted of 31 heterosexual married and two common-law couples living
within an hour of Toronto. The majority of couples were firmly in the upper-middle class based
on occupation, income, and education levels. Household incomes ranged from $50,000 to
$260,000, with an average combined salary of $163,000. This includes two single-income
families where the men were currently stay-at-home fathers. The rest of the couples in this study
were dual earners, with women and men each being primary bread-winners in nine families,
defined here as earning at least 60 percent more than their spouses (Tichenor 1999). Those with
lower education levels were found almost exclusively amongst the lower earners. One father had
only a high-school degree, three of the men and one of the women had attempted some post-
secondary, and another three men and one woman had received their college diplomas. Nine of
the men and 13 of the women had Bachelor’s degrees, and 17 of the men and 18 of the women
had graduate or professional-school degrees. The average age for men and women in this study
was 36. Finally, seven participants were visible minorities and the remainder were Caucasian.

Table 3 displays the characteristics of fathers’ leaves. Twenty-three of the fathers took leave as
solo caregivers, while 10 were on leave with their spouse. Leaves of between three to six months
were by far the most common (n = 23) amongst participants, 19 of whom spent their time as solo
caregivers. Men who took shorter or longer leaves than this were distinguished from the rest of
the sample by either a disinterest from one or both spouses in sharing the time, or a wife who
was ineligible for leave-taking, respectively.

Table 3: Characteristics of Fathers’ Leaves

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How Leave Taken</th>
<th>Length of Leave</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Short &lt; 3 months</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solo Caregiver</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With Spouse</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium 3-6 months</td>
<td>19</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long &gt; 6 months</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>23</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Couples participated in a joint interview lasting approximately two hours, usually in their homes. Interviews were semi-structured, based on a schedule of 50 to 60 open-ended questions about the decision to share leave, their time at home, and ideas about parenting. During this time, couples also completed an interactive survey in which they jointly assessed how a selection of physical tasks and mental responsibilities – capturing the less-visible work of planning, managing and worrying (Doucet 2015, 2009; Walzer 1998) – were allocated between them before and after having children (see Doucet 2001). I met fathers for a 45- to 90- minute individual interview three to four weeks later to follow up on these topics, as well as anything else they may not have wanted to discuss with their spouse present. Rather than simply tallying men’s time commitment to housework or childcare, this combination of methods approximates the conditions of daily family life by providing a context for joint meaning-making between spouses. The interactive approach elicited lively discussion as well as opportunities for participant reflexivity, through occasions of consensus and conflict generated by the activities (see Heaphy & Einarsdottir 2012; Valentine 1999). Together with fathers’ accounts of their time on leave, these interactively constituted narratives of family life are the data upon which this paper is based.

All interviews were audiotaped and later transcribed. Following recommendations in Kvale (1996), transcription did not include every pause or verbal mannerism, but was otherwise verbatim. Interviews were manually coded and analyzed following the principles of grounded theory and ‘saturation’ outlined by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Initial analysis involved immersing myself in the data and developing a series of open codes reflecting the themes that emerged repeatedly. Through constant comparison these were later developed into the more focused categories of analysis and theoretical insights presented here. An ongoing process of reflexivity through careful memoing enabled scrutiny of the research process in order to ensure that the arguments presented in this paper, though informed by the researcher’s interests and disciplinary perspectives (Charmaz 2004), are grounded in participants’ understandings and experiences.

3.4 Findings

All men in this study discussed how taking parental-leave enabled them to learn the skills of childcare and connect emotionally with baby. Participants differed, however, when it came to their degree of engagement. Only fathers who were deeply immersed in caregiving developed a sense of commitment to, and responsibility for, their child. Yet even if enacting parental leave
much like mothers, participants recognized that they were held to very different standards of success – the gendered context of parenting insulated men from the intense pressures that women face, but put them at risk for not working. The way fathers perceived this scrutiny determined how they incorporated parenting into their identities. Both the practical and cognitive experiences of fathers’ parental leave are discussed in detail below.

3.4.1 Practicing Parental Leave

The most common narrative of leave-taking in this study was of being thrown in at the deep end. Leave-taking was presented as a daunting but valued opportunity to learn caregiving under pressure that could not be fully experienced only on evenings and weekends:

Wade: Because you’re put into the mother role, or what was traditionally a mother role, you take on those – even if you’re not raised that way you suddenly – it’s there. So you learn how to do it and you become nurturing. You learn how to change diapers and do all those kind of things because that’s what you’re doing. [9 month solo-leave]

Mitch: If I hadn’t been home with Mia I would not know how to change a diaper, I would not know how to bathe a baby, I would not know how to burp a baby, I would not know how to do any of that stuff. That’s my sense. Maybe I’m speaking strongly. I would have much less comfort doing those things. Like when you are changing newborn diapers every hour or two you get better at it and you figure out very quickly what’s going on. [3 month joint-leave]

Although the skills may have been acquired over time, the sense of effectiveness and utility the men developed was attributed to their daily immersion in hands-on caregiving. As one father reported: “I’m not sure that had I not taken it I wouldn’t still feel alienated to a certain degree.”

Time at home was also conceived as a critical occasion for fathers to bond with baby. Bonding was described by the men as developing a mutual connection wherein both baby and father felt emotionally attached to one another, a process that didn’t necessarily occur spontaneously:

James: I just wanted to bond with him, you know, make sure he knew who I was because they spent most of the time with her just because she breastfed everyone; they were like attached. They were so attached; it was, “Mommy, mommy, mommy.” Then when I was there, “Where’s mommy?” But then finally, “Daddy, daddy, daddy.” So it felt good. [1.5 month solo-leave]

Sam: I love the time that we have to bond with him, connect with him. I guess especially me because Sarah was connected to him for nine months while he was in the womb. But if he had just come out and every day I was like, see you, and I’m off to work all day and then just get to see him for a few hours a night, he might not fully get to feel my significance in his life. [9 month joint-leave]
For most participants there was no question that the infants were born with, or would quickly develop, an essential connection to their mothers, but the men were insecure about their own significance to their children’s lives. As one father explained: “It’s not the same type of natural attachment to the father, so fostering that kind of connection is maybe even more important.”

Notably, the concept of bonding was used differently by some participants – to indicate a sense of investment. These men talked about how taking parental leave enabled them to “get more into” parenting, not just in terms of an emotional closeness, but in developing a sense of commitment to, and responsibility for, their child:

Len: I’m not trying to be judgmental, but I think my relationship is a little more – I think I’m a little more invested in a sense because I was with him – I think I bonded really well in that time off with him than other fathers have. [9 month solo-leave]

Scott: With Seth, I think my goal was really just to feel self-sufficient and, sort of, to bond, as vague as that sounds, to come out of it feeling like I could be involved in taking care of him from head to toe, from beginning to end. [6 month solo-leave]

Justin: I don’t think the bond I have with my kids would be as, I think it would have taken more time to develop and therefore, I think my engagement would have been less than it is now. I think because of the time I spent with my kids on leave, I feel like I have a proportionately stronger engagement to my kids [5.5 month solo-leave]

This is where important differences emerged amongst participants. Only the men who took solo leaves discussed feelings of self-sufficiency and ownership over parenting. That is, the cognizance and confidence to act independently and make decisions with an eye towards accountability emerged only if men had regularly managed childcare without a mother’s oversight. Whereas solo leave-takers differed in the amount of autonomy they exercised over the schedules – with some doing activities specified by their spouse and others developing their own routines – they were unable to rely on anyone else to take stock of baby’s needs and respond to them over prolonged periods of time. As one participant put it: “One thing that doesn’t happen if you’re home by yourself is, you know, your wife isn’t going to make the decisions, obviously.”

In contrast, I identify three kinds of fathers who took leave with a spouse and thus did not experience a deep immersion into daily care. First, describing themselves as “go-fors” or “support,” the ‘helpers’ took little initiative with baby, seeing their time at home as a chance to assist their wives. Noel, a mechanical engineer who took a six week leave because the couple had no local support system, exemplified this approach: “The first six weeks? Mainly together.
Don’t forget Naomi would sit down to breastfeed so I need to bring her, you know, ‘bring this, bring that.’ Or the phone rings or I need to change the channel.” The ‘helpers’ believed that the women had a natural affinity for caregiving that they themselves did not possess. Next, the ‘doers’ did not need to be asked to change a diaper or tend to a crying baby, yet deferred to mothers in matters beyond immediate caregiving, such as planning meals, scheduling, and determining baby’s developmental needs. As Adam, who took a six week leave from his engineering job when his son was ten months old, explained: “We didn’t look at it like now it’s my time with the child, not yours.” That is, though fathers joined their wives as active caregivers while on leave, the women maintained ownership over childcare.

Last, the ‘tag-teamers’ came closest to the experience of solo leave-takers due to multiple children or shift work, which meant dad was a lone caregiver for designated periods of time:

Kurt: There were times where if Kim was out doing one of her classes, like working, then I would have to be the primary caregiver for both kids. But then, I would kind of get some slack, especially early on in the summer when I think, when Kyle was first born. Like I would go out a couple of mornings a week and play tennis with a buddy, and then it would kind of just balance out. [9 month joint-leave]

Rina: We decided it was like firefighters, you know, five on five off, that’s how. So what would happen is for five days, say Monday to Friday, I would do six to eleven and that was my time with the baby. And he was free to sleep in, go for a jog, go to Starbucks, do whatever you want with your life for those five hours, and then vice versa. [Husband took 5 month shared-leave]

These men learned how to read and respond to their children’s needs attentively. But like even a skilled babysitter, ‘tag-team’ fathers’ authority was only temporary. At the end of dad’s time with baby, couples seamlessly stepped back into gendered manager/helper roles, and decision-making beyond immediate concerns was typically postponed until that time.

The difference between relying on a spouse to oversee childcare compared to being solely accountable was captured by Dylan, an architect who took a three-month leave with his wife for his first-born, and then a three-month solo leave with his second child:

When I was off with my daughter and I was on my own, it was a whole other world. I didn't have that extra help. That’s when I realized that it's taxing, extremely taxing. And I didn't get the same feeling when I was off with my wife. So it's, dads that share the leave are not getting the same experience at all. It's not, you can't even compare it. I think that if I didn't take the time off with my daughter, I would've had a skewed opinion. If I only had done the joint parental leave, I wouldn't have realized how difficult it really is.
The weight of primary responsibility resting squarely on one’s shoulders that Dylan alludes to was never fully experienced by joint leave-takers. While many fathers handled the drudgery of childcare tasks, only those who took leave by themselves detailed the mental attention and loss of autonomy demanded by primary caregiving. Cory, for instance, who left his job as a machinist to take a three-month solo leave and then be a stay-at-home father, discussed how “you’re on your own schedule but yet you're still, you're not free.” The lack of autonomy was a common theme amongst men on solo leaves:

Wade: It’s like you don’t even know what you’re in for until you actually do the leave. You just don’t have that emotional – you’re bonding because it’s your son, but you don’t have that “Wow!” It’s like the responsibility is on me now. I can’t walk out that door and go do what I want to do, which I could do before. [9 month solo-leave]

Ethan: If I’m completely honest, I kind of thought it would be more of a vacation and I would have some free time. I had plans too of like, oh, I’ll do this, and maybe I can do that. But there’s no break. You can’t decide what and when you want to do. You have a person and they decide what and when you’re going to do and how much attention they need. [6 month solo-leave]

Dylan: [To wife] What I think that you'd agree with me, what we hated most about it is that you no longer have any ability to make your own choices, to do what you want to do. That baby just dictates everything. And especially with our kids, like you decide that you have to go pee and the second that door would close, it was the biggest tantrum on earth. And I'd sit there going, ‘ugh.’ [3 month joint & solo-leaves]

The sense of encumbrance from having a helpless child reliant on one’s care is palpable in these quotes, but the men did not feel overcome by the job. Like mothers, those with prolonged primary responsibility adapted to the situation and developed a “need-oriented care practice” (Brandth & Kvande 2016; McMahon 1995) in which fathers learned to respond conscientiously to the unmitigated demands of their child:

Daniel: Draining, just leaving the house – how long it takes you to get the kid dressed, just being out and what you’ve got to bring and plan for in terms of ‘right, I need a bib, I need spoons, I need this.’ Normally Dara just packed up the diaper bag and I never knew what she was taking. That was probably the hardest part – just planning out what I needed to do for the day and what I needed to take. [3.5 month solo-leave]

James: You always felt like you were getting ready for the next thing. Get breakfast ready, feed him, clean him, change him, get him ready for a nap, put him down. Then let’s go, get up. And it’s just, especially at that age - it was just a year, but still – they’re barely eating solids, they still need a lot milk and formula. So it was just, get the formula ready. Get this ready. Oh, got to boil the water. Like you had to do all that stuff. It just felt like I was playing catch-up the entire time. [1.5 month solo-leave]
Wade: One of the things I enjoy isn’t the right word, but just felt when you’re with him, is you’re bonding and everything, but you’re still also responsible. Like even giving a bath – knowing how that really works, and getting him dry fast enough and getting him all ready so that he’s happy through the whole process. [9 month solo-leave]

Although solo leave-takers differed in the kind and extent of planning they undertook, all experienced some authoritative decision-making as part of an average day with baby. Whether a casual day at home with spontaneous outings, or a highly scheduled day filled with set times for lessons, meals, and naps, solo leave-takers were the ones accountable for their child’s well-being on a prolonged and routine basis. It was having this responsibility that led fathers to develop more of a personal stake in parenting, a sense of ownership the joint leave-takers never experienced.

3.4.2 Making Sense of Parental Leave

Clearly men can parent in ways quite similar to women when that is required of them (Doucet 2006; Chesley 2011). Considering the “moral dimension” of caregiving, which captures how individuals feel they should act and think others will view these actions, however, reveals persistent gender differences (Shirani, Henwood & Coltart 2012; Doucet 2006). Few, if any, participants exhibited anxiety over what they should be doing or feeling as parents. The men were confident in their caregiving because they felt the requirements were minimal. One father reported that he was “pretty sure I would be able to keep him alive” and another said “The needs are not that big. Feed her, make sure she sleeps, make sure she’s clean.” Despite first glance, these men are not trivializing the amount of work that goes into caring for a new baby, but articulating moral parenting identities. “Good” fathering was nothing more – or less – than ensuring that the child was content and the basic necessities of life were met. Any feelings of parental worry or doubt – even when very closely resembling women’s, as for Ian, quoted below – were offset by the conclusion that it was the men’s presence in their children’s lives that mattered:

Luke: You worried that you’re doing things the right way but I was never too worried about that specifically. I just figured if I was getting involved then something good was going to come out of it. I never really had a benchmark. [6 month solo leave]

Ian: It’s daunting, like I always wonder what am I supposed to do? Am I supposed to be reading to him more? Talking to him more? I mean I focus on trying to make sure he’s happy and that he’s fed and that he’s, you know. He’s trying to learn to stand now; I just keep working that. Sitting behind him, making sure he doesn’t fall. Just stuff like that. I figure I can, I figure there’s far worse things I could be doing, so he seems happy and to me that’s the main thing. [4.5 month solo leave]
The men in this study felt “being there” was “good enough” even as, or perhaps because, they recognized that the same was likely not true for their wives. Erik, who took a six-month leave from public health administration, for instance, lamented on this discrepancy: “The expectation is that mom be the primary caregiver. There’s a lot of pressure straight out of the hospital...I almost wish there was some pressure [on men] because I think that would mean that we’ve gotten a bit further.” Others noted a different set of parenting standards that mothers were held to:

Simon: I would get it more from old ladies. Like, "oh, what a good dad" sort of stuff. Yeah, actually those annoyed me because if I’m the good dad, there's a very low bar for good dad. It's like I, you show up, you get called a good dad. [4.5 month solo leave]

Reuben: People would take pity upon me more because I was a useless dumb father. Like that would be really kind of what you felt. People would kind of show some sort of empathy in their faces as opposed to a judgmental head shake. [5 month solo leave]

Paul: That was one way in which it was much easier to be the man I think. Cause people thought it was miraculous that the baby was still alive. And baby was clean. That was basically the standard by which people thought, so, if I met that…and they just didn't really judge me anyways because they thought it was so great that I was doing this at all. Whereas, like I'd go to the pediatrician and see these women compete about how many teeth they [babies] had. I actually overheard a conversation where, ‘oh he's got seven teeth.’ ‘Well he doesn't have any teeth, but he can chew steak with these gums!’ Like have you people lost your minds? [4 month solo leave]

Thus not only were participants “immune” (Shirani, Coltart & Henwood 2012) to the ‘mompetition’ and cultural expectations of maternal culpability women had to contend with (McMahon 1995; Wall 2010; Hays 1996), but they were often lauded as “good fathers” just for spending time with baby. And this way of thinking was often internalized: “I just figured if I was getting involved then something good was going to come of it. I never really had a benchmark.” Men in this study felt “just being there” was “good enough” even as, or perhaps because, they recognized that the same was not true for their wives. Although some found this double standard “vaguely insulting,” cultural praise more likely contributed to fathers’ positive assessments of leave-taking and the extent to which they felt changed by the experience. One father felt he had developed “more of an equilibrium in my emotional life than before.” Another stated that he had become “more well-rounded, and more in touch with my feminine side.” Fathers found themselves deeply affected when hearing of tragic events involving children in ways they had not felt before becoming parents. A child’s first daycare experience was especially difficult for some:
James: When I took Joey to daycare that first week, I hated it. It was the worst week of my life. When I dropped him off he cried the entire time and he cried when I picked him up for the first three days, and I was devastated; devastated for those three days. I made [my wife] take [second child] to daycare. [1.5 month solo-leave]

Richard: I had a really tough time just not being with him. And the first day I dropped him off at daycare for a trial, like I dropped him off for two hours, I went down to the beach and just stared at the water, blinking back tears. [8.5 month solo leave]

The experience of parenting—felt most acutely by those who took solo leaves—was so meaningful that some men came to incorporate caregiving into their identities. And they did so in ways that challenged conventional definitions of masculinity:

Dylan: Women are far superior because they can do everything a man can do and they can give birth. I can’t do that. But I can help her raise a kid, so that adds one more feather in my cap. So men that don’t do that, I find that very unmasculine to not have that extra bit of knowledge and wisdom. [3 month joint & 3 month solo-leave]

Austen: I think if I had to define it, it made me feel more masculine. We’re not going by the traditional sense of fatherhood, I guess. The sort of fifties dad is more standoffish and all that. I think that dads who are more involved are more, I like to think are more masculine, that you can give of oneself in that way. [4.5 month solo leave]

As in these quotes, leave-taking was framed as a “bit of a badge of honour” by participants—not because interrupting one’s career was seen as the masculine exercising of autonomy (Schmidt et al 2015)– but because nurturing became constitutive of self. To make sense of this change, participants commonly compared their involvement to other dads—past or present—as a way to problematize conventional enactments of fatherhood and actively reconstruct new masculine identities and practices that embraced the values of caring. Emphasizing knowledge acquisition, competence, and commitment to the job, Dylan’s comments indicate how some fathers made sense of caregiving within the frame of conventional masculine qualities (Brandth & Kvande 2016; Lomas 2013; Doucet 2006). Other fathers like Austen integrated emotion and the relational qualities of care to broaden their masculine identities (Elliot 2016).

What was notably absent from this sample were narratives of “failed masculinity” (Doucet 2006; Miller 2010). Although participants did encounter similar confusion and teasing by relatives, co-workers, and “the metaphoric lady at the grocery store” reported by stay-at-home dads (Doucet 2006: 184; Solomon 2014), it became clear that the majority had access to a resource that protected their sense of self—a job or career they would be returning to. The significance of employment was illuminated by the way fathers spoke about not working:
Simon: I don't think people were judging me. If they were, I wasn't really paying attention. It's not, I was pretty happy to be on pat leave, so it wasn't... If I was unemployed and looking after a kid because I couldn't find a job, I'm sure I would feel a different perception. But no, not under the circumstances. [4.5 month solo leave]

Scott: I used to look and think, oh, he’s been stuck with the kids, or he’s off work or he’s out of work, or whatever bundle of thoughts about a guy who’s stuck doing the groceries with his children. But now I know well that he can be fully employed and still want to take the kid out and do the groceries. [6 month solo leave]

The comments here are subtle, but the notion that men’s caregiving is acceptable only insofar as it is temporary or combined with paid work was implicit amongst participants – as it likely is more broadly. As one father summed up: “Nobody ever asked me about, everyone knew I was going back to work. It's not like, it was never a question.” With men’s employment taken for granted, the protective function of paid work to one’s masculinity became evident only because a handful of fathers experienced discomfort while on parental leave:

Ethan: I would go to environments that I did feel comfortable in, [chain wholesale or hardware stores], places where I was a guy. I wasn’t going to the baby stuff… In swim [class] I’d think about that, like “geez, I’m here with all these moms. What the hell are they thinking, that I’m kind of a deadbeat guy?” [6 month solo leave]

Greg: I don’t know if it was me, but it was always there. Like if I was walking down the street where someone's going to think, ‘why are you with this child?’ [3 month solo leave]

Len: One day I was at a light and there was three nannies beside me and they were just looking at me, looking at the baby, and I said: “What, you’ve never seen a ‘manny’ before?” They were laughing, but I had to make light of it. It’s awkward because you know they’re thinking “why is this guy with a baby?” [9 month solo leave]

When asked about if they were cognizant of what others might think of them being on leave, the narratives of insecurity stood in sharp contrast to the majority’s reports of indifference. It became clear that what these dads had in common was a sense of guilt, an emotion that signals feelings of wrong-doing (Hochschild 1989). Although they deeply enjoyed their time with baby, these men were still not sure if it was “right” for them to take leave in the first place:

Scott: I think Canadians will be like, ‘oh, that’s great, that’s great,’ but really on the inside it grates on them. They think that you’re soft, that you’re taking advantage, and that comes out in different ways. [I explained] that this was a paid leave and I wasn’t just…yeah, but that made me feel even more spoiled. [6 month solo-leave]
Simon: Working as a government lawyer, you feel the need generally to justify why you're not working in... so it wasn't any different when I was on pat leave. You don't actually feel it, but you know, the idea. If anyone's judging you for anything, it's ‘why are you not a [financial district] lawyer?’ [4.5 month solo leave]

Comparing participant’s accounts made it clear that the way the men experienced being caregivers depended on how they located themselves against norms of hegemonic masculinity. I identified three patterns in the data. Most commonly, when fathers felt ‘accomplished’ in their employment – a cultural mark of manhood – they were confident while on parental leave. As one older father explained: “I’m less afraid of having to prove something now. I think I’ve made my mark career-wise. I don’t care what people, I’m like, “Hey this is my main priority right now.” In contrast, the few men who were acutely conscious of judgment were those who had trouble positioning earning as a primary part of their identities. Being on parental leave seemed to catalyze a moral identity crisis for men that were ‘ambivalent’ about their occupational success because of lower earnings in the public or non-profit sector, often in conjunction with a higher-earning spouse. This commonly manifested as uneasiness about others’ perceptions of having taken their wife’s rightful place at home or indulgingly exploiting workplace policies.

A third small group of men had lower earnings or lesser career status, but managed gendered expectations by eschewing conventional norms. Proclaiming that they are not “the stereotypical male” or “what people consider manly” with reference to a disinterest in sports or machismo, these ‘unfazed’ men had already come to terms with having ‘failed’ at hegemonic masculinity before having children. They were at ease being on leave because it did not present a challenge to their sense of self. As one father put it: “I’ve embraced that, so, it’s, I mean there was a while, you know, when I was younger, that bothered me. Now I’m proud to be the geek dad... it doesn’t bother me at all. You get the occasional doubt every now and then but it’s fleeting.”

Being ambivalent or unfazed however, were exceptions to the rule. The majority’s comfort confirms that a strong foothold in their working life may be a precondition for feeling good about being on leave (Brandth & Kvande 1998) and being actively involved in infant care (Fox 2009). The current study finds, however, that it was not fathers’ actual earnings or job status that shaped how they experienced leave-taking. It was a perceived lack of masculine resources – “social status acquired through being a family provider, especially in high income or status professions” (Doucet 2006: 203) – that some participants could not square with caregiving. Although nurturing one’s child was not seen as un-masculine, with earning still very much tied to cultural definitions of
manhood (Townsend 2002; Holter 2007) being off-work while doing so engendered feelings of wrong-doing amongst those who were already uneasy about their moral identities as men.

3.5 Conclusions

With little existing research on the actual experience of fathers’ parental leave (Brandth & Kvande 2016), it is important to understand men’s day-to-day reality of caregiving and how this time with baby may be personally and socially transformative. Hearing from men about what it was like being at home with an infant reveals the significance of both the content and the context of their leave-taking to this process. First, although all fathers in this study discussed with detail and enthusiasm the parenting skills and emotional bonds they developed while on parental leave, only some articulated a sense of ownership over their child’s care. Those who took leave with a spouse, despite varying levels of practical involvement, all deferred to mothers as parenting experts. Never being executive caregivers for a prolonged period of time meant these men were insulated from the weight of full responsibility – which was experienced by solo leave-takers as a lack of autonomy and unremitting “thinking about the baby” (Walzer 1998). The significance of accountability was not lost on the solo-leave-takers – many sought to quantify the time required to produce this distinct change to their parenting, with estimates ranging from one to four months.

Second, despite the care work many fathers took on while on leave, participants admittedly did not feel like mothers, even when acting as solo caregivers. This was not because the men were determined to “distinguish themselves as men, as heterosexual males and as fathers, not as mothers” (Doucet 2006: 196). It was because participants were held to gendered standards by their social contexts. Fathers were exempted from cultural pressures to parent the “right way” that mothers face, but celebrated as “good fathers” just for spending time with baby. Nevertheless, many did come to integrate caregiving into their sense of self. But it was only because a handful of fathers were uneasy about their time at home that the majority’s confidence became recognizable as identity-building. Moved by the experience of parenting, participants were able to fit caregiving into conventional masculinity (Lomas 2013), or broadened notions of manhood to integrate the values and practices of care (Elliott 2016) – but only if their masculinity was never on the line (Morgan 1992). In contrast, participants who were anxious over not meeting internalized cultural standards of manliness seemed unable to feel unreservedly good about their time spent caregiving. Thus, whereas Elliott (2016) suggests that the potential for men’s
caregiving lies in the rejection of domination and non-conformance to expected masculine roles, this study finds that this is unlikely without a secure connection to hegemonic masculinity. Only the handful of fathers who had already scorned the ideals of manhood could unabashedly embrace the emotional and interdependent qualities of care without experiencing discomfort.

Analyzing the practical and cognitive experience of fathers’ leave-taking thus sheds light on the transformative potential of caring work and the conditions that can promote this. This study demonstrates that given the opportunity, there are men who become highly involved in hands-on caregiving and who take responsibility for managing that care. As solo leave-takers, fathers have little choice but to immerse themselves in routine childcare, the performance of which leads to an increased sense of ownership and accountability – but to their children only. Fathers were spared from the broader social scrutiny mothers faced. Yet low standards for fathers’ success may have contributed to the ease with which participants integrated caregiving into their identities. Though all men in this study embraced the values of interdependence and nurturing, caregiving was something fathers were likely to vest a new sense of self in when the rewards of parenting were felt acutely, and the risk to one’s sense of sense of self was perceived as low.

Although the institution of fatherhood may not have yet undergone a radical transformation, it is noteworthy that some men are willing to negotiate the bumpy terrain of changing norms and practices. The significance of employment as a resource of masculinity, however, must be theorized. Without putting one’s career in jeopardy, taking parental leave enabled ‘accomplished’ fathers to practice the involved fatherhood espoused by contemporary discourses. In doing so, many were moved to incorporate parenting into their self-concepts alongside their roles as earners. Without confidence in one’s employment, however, caregiving was a riskier endeavour. Parental leave only exacerbated feelings of insecurity for dads that were ‘ambivalent’ about their occupational success. As a result, these men seemed unable to ground their self-concepts in earning or caregiving. Yet other fathers – including some who lacked career status or became stay-at-home parents – were ‘unfazed’ by their distance from masculine ideals. Having already accepted this “failure,” anchoring one’s identity in caregiving presented no risk to these men’s moral sense of self. Conceptions of, and attachments to, masculinity were clearly far from monolithic in this study. For the majority, however, leave-taking represented an important liminal period in which fathers could ‘test the waters’ of hands-on caregiving without putting their masculinity on the line, an experience which was personally, and likely socially, rewarding.
The temporary nature of fathers’ time at home may limit the potential for more radical change because having a career anchor means that leave-taking does not necessarily disrupt hegemonic masculinity for the men who do it, nor does it radically change gendered divisions of work and care in the family. Nevertheless, if we accept that gender is an “ongoing emergent aspect of social interaction” (Deutsch 2007: 107; West & Zimmerman 1987), then fathers’ everyday struggles to balance work and family must be understood as a “constitutive part of a wider societal process, involving slow changes both in consciousness and in practice” (Sullivan 2004: 219; Ranson 2012). This study demonstrates that the greater involvement – especially as solo caregivers – that fathers have in the early weeks and months of parenthood, the more likely they are to feel personally moved by the experience and ultimately incorporate the values and practices of care into their identities (Elliot 2016; Lomas 2013). When men come to be practiced in, and feel accountable for, their parenting they become, and see themselves, as equal and active caregivers – if they have the confidence to do so. Leave-taking is thus an important way that cultural configurations of acceptable masculinity can be re-shaped. It provides opportunities for men with strong or severed ties to conventional masculinity to embrace caregiving without threatening their sense of self, ultimately increasing the visibility of men as caregivers and buttressing the moral identities of those who do not feel secure crossing entrenched gendered boundaries.
Chapter 4
Fathers’ Parental Leave Use and Subsequent Domestic Involvement

4.1 Introduction

Despite contemporary changes in the ways couples are handling the allocation of paid and unpaid work – with women spending more time doing paid work and less time on housework, and men increasing the time they spend on housework and childcare – the gendered division of household work persists (Bianchi, Milkie, Sayer & Robinson 2012; Milan, Keown & Urquijo 2016; Fisher et al. 2007). This is especially true when children are pre-school aged or younger (Ornstein & Stalker 2013). When couples are faced with the increased demands and time pressures of juggling family responsibilities and employment, conventional divisions of labour tend to be the paths of least resistance (Fox 2009: 6; see also Cowan & Cowan 1992; Walzer 1998). Gendered parenting patterns take root early on as mothers develop a sense of competence and confidence that emerges from meeting the demands of day-to-day primary infant care, which fathers are less likely to experience (Fox 2009; Bobel 2002; Miller 2011).

Noting the distinct paths that men and women tend to take into parenthood, scholars have increasingly called for parity in the performance of carework in the first year of parenting as the first step towards long term gender equality (Rehel; Gornick and Meyers 2008; Haas 1992; Risman 1998). The underlying assumption is that fathers’ intense involvement during the first year of life, in what is conventionally women’s area of expertise, might set the stage for men’s continued involvement in child care and the eventual realization of the goal of equal parenthood (Haas 1992: 14; see also Miller 2011; Lamb 1997; Wisensale 2001). International research has demonstrated support for the positive effect of fathers’ leave-taking on their increased involvement with their children (Brandth & Kvande 2003; Chronholm 2004; Haas & Hwang 2008; Pleck 1997; Seward, Yeatts, Zottarelli & Fletcher 2006). Policy analysts (O’Brien 2009; Haas & Rostgaard 2011), thus tend to praise national systems that enable the most paternal availability through measures such as paternity leave, parental leave, and flexible working practices. This ‘Field of Dreams’ approach to father involvement – presuming that ‘if you build it, they will come’ – is oversimplified however. Engagement in the domestic realm is not an automatic outcome of men’s increased availability to their children (Meil 2013). Indeed, an
understanding of the mechanisms underlying men’s familial involvement is relatively undeveloped (Schober 2014). By analyzing when leave-sharing couples subsequently shared domestic labour and responsibility and when they did not using interactive research methods, my research thus sheds light on the sense-making and family dynamics that can reproduce or challenge the gendered arrangements typical of early parenthood.

Canada is an ideal place to study parental leave outcomes because it is one of the few OECD countries where a well-compensated gender-neutral leave policy exists (O’Brien 2009). Fathers are entitled to take up to 35 weeks of paid leave from work when a child is born, although there is no period designated for them specifically. This stands in sharp contrast to the benefits provided by Quebec’s separate provincial plan (QPIP) which mimics Scandinavian policies by providing fathers with three to five weeks leave time that is not transferable to their spouses (Tremblay 2014). While far more Quebecois fathers now take leave compared to the rest of Canada [86% versus 12% in 2015] (Statistics Canada 2016), the duration typically remains short and taken in tandem with a spouse, and therefore does not disrupt the mother-infant dyad or fathers’ breadwinning potential (McKay, Marshall & Doucet 2012: 221). If introducing non-transferable leave merely adds time at home for fathers without challenging the expectation that mothers are primary caregivers (Leira 2002: 101), then it is important to avoid idealizing men’s high rates of leave-taking. Instead, attention must be paid to how the experience of leave for fathers can shape the ways couples develop parenting practices and divide household work.

Drawing on interviews with 30 couples in which fathers took parental leave, I demonstrate that despite participants’ early involvement with their children, there is considerable variation in the ways couples manage domestic labour and responsibility. Although the majority of leave-taking fathers in this study were highly active in childcare, some were not. Far fewer men participated equally in household tasks and the mental work of family management. Analyzing fathers’ domestic involvement – or lack thereof – reveals that simply offering men parental leave is not enough to “undo” gendered divisions of work and responsibility (Deutsch 2007). Participation was discretionary for fathers in this study, contingent on the men’s individual sense of duty towards the physical and mental work required of family life. Although it became clear that most fathers did not hold gendered attitudes about proper family roles, they did have the privilege of overlooking work and responsibility that was not personally compelling. Nevertheless, this research finds that the circumstances of leave-taking and family life, as well as
changing cultural expectations, can encourage fathers’ domestic involvement. The ways these factors came to bear within the couple context will be discussed in full below.

4.2 Literature Review

Research on primary care fathers demonstrates that men can parent in ways quite similar to mothers when that is required of them (Risman 1986; Doucet 2006; Chesley 2011). Consequently, there has been increased emphasis placed on immersing men in the world of infant care. The assumption is that if men experience the transition to parenting in a way that is similar to women’s experience, they will come to develop the sense of responsibility that is characteristic of mothers’ parenting (Rehel 2014: 114; Gornick & Myers 2008). Offering men paid parental leave is thought to be an important step in removing some of the practical constraints to their becoming engaged and equal parents (Haas & Hwang 2008; Risman 1998: 21).

The relationship between fathers’ use of parental leave and their family involvement has found empirical support across the globe. With a long history of father-targeting leave schemes, much of the research comes out of Sweden. In a survey of 319 couples, for instance, Haas (1992) found that two-fifths of fathers who took leave were reported to share childcare equally after the leave was over, compared to only one-fifth of fathers who did not take leave. Leave-takers also reported more hours of childcare as well as higher satisfaction with child contact (Haas & Hwang 2008). Another study showed that those who took longer leaves were more likely to report sharing responsibility for caregiving and spending more time with children than men who took fewer days (Almqvist & Duvander 2014). There was also a tendency towards increased emotional attachment between fathers and their children as well as increased understanding of their partners’ workload among men who took leave, although conventional divisions of household labour persisted (Almqvist, Sandberg and Dahlgren 2011: 201; Thomas & Hildingsson 2009).

Results from other countries are similar. Wall (2014) found that Portuguese fathers who took leave alone describe their learning process as going beyond that of being a ‘helper’ to taking responsibility and learning emotional care. The men also reported a stronger connection with the child. An American study of 38 new parents found that the 16 fathers who took parental leave (average 12 days) were more likely to report sharing specific childcare tasks, however there was no effect of leave-taking on time spent with children or sense of responsibility for them (Seward
et al 2006). In the UK, Tanaka and Waldfogel (2007) surveyed 9592 families and found that taking leave and working shorter hours were related to fathers being more involved with the baby. Men were 25 percent more likely to change diapers if they took any leave, leading the authors to conclude that policies that provide parental leave or flexible work arrangements could promote greater father involvement with infants (421).

Collectively these studies suggest that leave-taking has the potential to boost men’s practical and emotional investment in infant care. This outcome, however, is neither guaranteed nor absolute, and the impact on men’s participation in housework is even more tenuous (Almqvist & Duvander 2014; Thomas & Hildingsson 2009; Almqvist, Sandberg & Dahlgren 2011). Assuming that greater access to men’s “parental resources” translates into more benefits to families (O’Brien 2009; Caragata & Miller 2008; Pleck 2007), is thus problematic for a number of reasons. First, not all occasions of paternal availability are the same. Haataja (2009) argues that usage statistics often fail to distinguish the type of leave used, and thus offer only a hint about how men’s time off work is actually spent. High rates of leave-use in Finland, for instance, mask the fact that a great majority of fathers’ days are taken as short paternity leaves immediately following birth or while the mother is on vacation from work (Haataja 2009). Wilson and Prior (2010) elaborate on the important differences between shared and solo caregiving for fathers:

If the mother is at home, the father, while theoretically accessible for interaction, may not have any engagement with children at all. For example, he could pursue recreational pursuits, complete work tasks, or perform household chores without any interaction with a child. On the other hand, if he is the only parent available, this is much less likely, and it is also highly likely that he would need to make some decisions in relation to meeting children’s needs. (1393)

Simply taking parental leave does not indicate that fathers are taking any responsibility for caregiving, let alone doing childcare tasks. Alternatively, it is possible that men who take leave are more child-oriented or equality-minded than other fathers and accordingly may be more likely to participate actively in childcare (Haas & Hwang 2008:93). Thus researchers must be careful not to presume that simply being on parental leave is what leads men to develop the type of responsibility that propels them to be active co-parents (cf. Rehel 2014: 126).

Second, families are not a blank canvas upon which the potential benefits of public policies are deposited. Attention to the ways in which material circumstances and cultural arrangements
interact to encourage couples to adopt or resist gendered practices is necessary (Singley & Hynes 2005: 383; Fox 2009). There is mounting evidence, for instance, that individuals do not simply try to negotiate out of childcare like they do with housework (Raley, Bianchi & Wang 2012: 1423; Sullivan 2013). Although greater access to resources – in the forms of education, income, and employment – may enable opting out of chores by off-loading them onto the spouse with less relative bargaining power, typically women (Treas & Tai 2012; Fox 2009; Sullivan & Gershuny 2016), both mothers and fathers are actually spending more time than ever before with their children (Houle, Turcotte & Wendt 2017; Bianchi 2011: 28). Dads persistently lag behind moms, however, when it comes to the planning and orchestrating involved in childcare (Christopher 2012; Doucet 2009; Ruddick 1989). Overall, the work required to sustain the family remains gendered with women more likely to handle the least desirable tasks and core housework duties (Thomas and Hildingson 2009: see also Bianchi et al 2012).

Changing circumstances can lead to some redistribution of the workload, however. Fox (2009), for instance, points out that the work involved in “making family” in the first year of parenthood is particularly gender-producing (see also McMahon 1995). As women go back to work, however, Thomas and Hildingson (2009: 144) found men’s participation in child care and household chores increases, especially if they are returning to full-time employment (see also Houle et al 2017). Although fathers remain far less likely than mothers to either drop out of the labor force entirely or make alterations to the number of hours they are employed, they do more solo-care and thus take over more child care responsibilities when their wives contribute more to family earnings (Raley et al 2012). With older children, both fathers’ and mothers’ child care time is reduced as care needs diminish (Lamb 2000), and women are also more likely to work outside the home, thus increasing the demand for child care involvement of fathers (Raley et al 2012: 1435; Gornick & Myers 2008). Attention to the ways in which families are constantly negotiating changing circumstances and cultural norms is thus necessary when contemplating the de-gendering potential of men’s leave-taking.

Although the tendency has been to view leave-taking fathers as the forbearers of familial gender equality (O’Brien 2009; Caragata & Miller 2008, Haas & Rostgaard 2011), the multiple and variable dimensions of care indicated by this literature make it clear that this assumption does not do justice to the complexity of managing family life. This paper instead aims to add to the small, but important, body of literature that examines the ways in which material circumstances interact
with individual tastes and preferences to enable or dissuade equitable sharing arrangements (Ranson 2012; see also Fox 2009; Doucet 2006, 2009; Shows & Gerstel 2009; Brandth & Kvande 2016; Hochschild 1989). After reviewing the data and methodology of this study, I will examine patterns in participants’ involvement in social reproductive labour, in conjunction with the ways the men themselves understand and explain their participation, in order to shed light on the processes through which fathers’ sense of duty to care, clean, and plan may be connected to, and encouraged by, their leave-taking and other relevant factors.

4.3 Data and Methods

As part of a larger project examining fathers’ leave-taking, I conducted interviews in 2014 with 33 Canadian couples in which men took at least six weeks of parental leave under the federal government’s Employment Insurance program. Provided they have worked a minimum of 600 hours in the year preceding their claim, this plan entitles biological mothers to 15 weeks of paid leave with a further 35 available to either parent, remunerated at 55 percent of previous salary (to a maximum yearly payout of $26,730 in 2014). Participants were recruited through postings on neighbourhood groups on Facebook and online discussion (parenting-related and more general) forums with a high presence of southern Ontarians. In order to participate, fathers had to be cohabiting with their partners, willing to participate in a joint interview, and to have taken EI parental leave for at least six weeks within the last three years.

The resulting sample consisted of 31 heterosexual married couples and two common law ones, all living within an hour of the Toronto area. The majority of couples were firmly in the upper-middle class based on occupation, income, and education levels. Household incomes ranged from $50,000 to $260,000, with an average combined salary of $163,000. This included two single-income families where the men were once employed but currently stay-at-home fathers. In nine other couples, the wives were the primary breadwinners, defined here as earning at least 60 percent more than their husbands (Tichenor 1999). Those with lower education levels were found almost exclusively amongst the lower earners. One father had only a high school degree, three of the men and one of the women had attempted some college or university, and another three men and one woman had received their college diplomas. Nine of the men and 13 of the women had Bachelor’s degrees, and 17 of the men and 18 of the women had graduate or
professional school degrees. The average age for both mothers and fathers in this study was 36. Finally, seven participants were visible minorities and the remainder were Caucasian.

Table 3 displays the characteristics of fathers’ leaves. Twenty-three of the men took leave as solo caregivers, while 10 were on leave with their spouse. Leaves of between three to six months were by far the most common amongst participants (n = 23). Those who took shorter or longer leaves than this tended to do so because there was disinterest in sharing or their spouse was ineligible, respectively, distinguishing them from the rest of the sample. Given three of the men were still on parental leave at the time of the study, hereafter the discussion focuses on the 30 fathers whose practices and understandings can be compared pre- and post-leave-taking.

Table 3: Characteristics of Fathers’ Leaves

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Length of Leave</th>
<th>Short &lt; 3 months</th>
<th>Medium 3-6 months</th>
<th>Long &gt; 6 months</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Solo Caregiver</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With Spouse</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Couples participated in a joint interview lasting between one-and-a-half to two-and-a-half hours, usually in participants’ homes. Interviews were semi-structured, based on a schedule of 50 to 60 open-ended questions asking both spouses about their time on leave, ideas about parenting, and reflections on sharing parental leave. During this time, couples also completed an interactive survey in which they had to jointly assess how a selection of physical tasks and mental responsibilities – capturing the less-visible work of planning, managing and worrying that goes into meeting family needs (Doucet 2015, 2009; Walzer 1998) – had been allocated between them before and after having children (see Doucet 2001; 1996). These themes were elaborated on by the fathers when we met for a 45 to 90 minute follow-up individual interview three to four weeks later in order to expand on the parental leave experience and participants’ feelings about their time at home, as well as anything else they may not have wanted to discuss with their spouse present. Using both individual and couple interviews ensured participants’ voices could be heard and analyzed comparatively (see Heaphy & Einarsdottir 2012; Valentine 1999).
This combination of methods also approximated the conditions of daily family life by providing a context for lively discussion and joint meaning-making. Couples spent as much, if not more, time talking to each other as they did responding to the interview questions directly. This was especially true of the interactive survey. Though quantitative in design, the goal of the survey was not to simply tally men’s time commitment to domestic work. Seeing how couples both narrate and handle occasions of consensus and conflict in situ enabled observation of some practices directly, as well as allowing some analytical purchase on the credibility of participants’ accounts of practices (Polack & Green 2016). Given that allocations of household labour and responsibility are not individually determined, using joint methods thus provided the setting to not only study the data generated by that interaction, but also the opportunity to study the interaction itself (Allan 1980), an important asset when studying “the complexities and contradictions of the contested realities of shared lives” (Valentine 1999: 73).

The men’s participation in childcare was gauged through their involvement in changing diapers, bathing the child, putting the child to bed, cutting his or her nails, soothing the child, and taking him or her to the doctor. In addition to these childcare tasks, caregiving responsibility was operationalized as making sure there are diapers, planning birthday parties, worrying about health and well-being, determining when the child should see a doctor, and deciding which activities he or she should participate in. Measures for housework included making dinner, doing the laundry, tidying up, vacuuming, and shoveling snow, whereas household responsibility was coded as making sure there is food in the fridge, remembering important dates, and managing bill paying. The concepts “domestic” and “reproductive” are used throughout this paper to capture the sum total of the physical and mental work involved in raising a family and maintaining a household.

All interviews were audiotaped and later transcribed. Following recommendations in Kvale (1996), transcription did not include every pause or verbal mannerism, but was otherwise verbatim. Interviews were manually coded and analyzed following the principles of grounded theory and ‘saturation’ outlined by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Though survey results are expressed in numbers in this paper, they too were used to qualitatively theorize the empirical diversity in the properties of group members. Initial analysis involved immersing myself in the data and developing a series of open codes reflecting the themes that emerged repeatedly. Through constant comparison and sorting these were later developed into the more focused categories of analysis and theoretical insights presented here. An ongoing process of reflexivity
through careful memoing enabled scrutiny of the research process. This ensured the arguments presented in this paper, though informed by the researcher’s interests and disciplinary perspectives (Charmaz 2004), are grounded in participants’ understandings and experiences.

4.4 Findings

Despite the common experience of leave-taking, fathers varied considerably in the extent of their involvement (see table 4). All men in this study cared deeply about their families. They did not, however, all feel the same sense of duty to participate in caregiving, household upkeep, or the thinking and planning required of this work. In fact, only three fathers in this study were fully and equally involved in all areas. By examining childcare tasks, housework tasks, caregiving responsibility, and household responsibility separately, it became clear that paternal involvement was contingent on how heavily invested the men were personally in each. The four aspects of familial involvement, and the ways fathers’ commitments to them developed or languished within couples’ interactional context (Singley & Hynes 2005; see also Fox 2009) will be discussed in detail below.

Table 4: Fathers’ Involvement Post Parental-Leave

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Shared Equally</th>
<th>More or Mostly Spouse</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Childcare Tasks</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housework Tasks</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household Responsibility</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caregiving Responsibility</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.4.1 Duty to Care?

As table 5 indicates, at the time of the study the vast majority of couples (21 of 30) reported that fathers were as involved in childcare tasks as their partners when asked how caregiving tasks were distributed using a five point scale. None ranked a father’s involvement above a mother’s. Previous research suggests long leaves are an important predictor of men’s’ future involvement (Chronholm 2004; Haas & Hwang 2008; Seward et al 2006; Nepomnyaschy & Waldfogel 2007), yet along with those who took the shortest leaves, the fathers who spent the most time at home were actually the least likely to share childcare in this study. Although the group sizes are small,
comparing how fathers spoke about their decision to take parental leave revealed differences between participants that were theoretically significant. The three men who took more than seven months of parental leave, for instance, did so because their partner was self-employed or otherwise ineligible for leave under the employment insurance program. With explanations such as “it made financial sense,” “in one word, I would say economics,” and “for me it wasn’t, ‘I want to take the time off.’ For me, it made sense to take the time off,” it was clear that the logic of necessity prevailed when fathers were not intent on leave-taking.

### Table 5 Couples’ Division of Childcare Post-Parental Leave by Length of Leave

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Length of Leave</th>
<th>Shared Equally</th>
<th>More or Mostly Wife</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&gt; 7 months</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-7 months</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-5 months</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 3 months</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>22</strong></td>
<td><strong>8</strong></td>
<td><strong>30</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Had the wives of the longest leave-takers been eligible for federal parental leave, the default would have been for the women to use the statutory time. As participants explained, the priority was clearly protecting what was taken for granted as the mothers’ year at home:

Sam: [To his wife] you would’ve had to be off the whole time, yeah. I mean I guess I would’ve taken a few weeks at the beginning, and then I get a week of family leave in addition to four weeks’ vacation. So that means I really would’ve only worked 10 of the first 12 months...so yeah, I guess that’s what would’ve happened. She would’ve had the whole year. [9 month joint-leave]

Richard: I think I would’ve assumed that she would just take the year and then it would be hers to offer to me, if she wanted to give me some. I don’t think I would’ve said, “Hey, I want to take three months or four months.” I think that’s hers to offer. [8.5 month solo leave]

The elective character attributed to fathers’ time with baby was also present for those who spent the shortest time at home. Leaves less than three months tended to be because at least one spouse was reluctant to undermine maternal caregiving. While couples endorsed some sharing, whether the men were content with their six to eight weeks allotments, or begrudgingly deferred to their wife’s wishes, the implication was that men’s leave-taking was discretionary; the women’s time with baby was sacrosanct:
James: I wanted six months but I knew I wasn’t going to get it. So I just kept two months. It was supposed to be two months. But there was the timing... She didn’t want to go back right at Christmas so I did not get eight weeks; I got six. And since I only got six weeks with Joey, I only got six weeks with Jane. [1.5 month solo-leave]

Length of leave was thus itself not a predictor of subsequent participation in caregiving because the reasons fathers use these policies may serve as proxies for deeper beliefs about gender and parenting. If a man’s leave is undertaken half-heartedly or as a practical solution, for instance, this will not necessarily disrupt the hegemonic pattern of small doses of fathercare as the woman often remains the true primary caregiver regardless of who is at home with the child (Leira 2002: 101). Indeed, some of the eight non-sharers maintained the belief that women’s caregiving was natural and preferable:

Len: Just the feeling; the maternal and the paternal feeling. They’re two different things. It’s a totally different bond and that’s why I think that first year’s important for the mother. [9 month solo leave]

Ethan: Definitely in the earliest time, mom is the best, in my opinion. I think there’s a sense of nurturing, both physical and non-physical, that comes from a mother for the baby. I think it’s necessary if you’re breastfeeding or if you’re not. I just think the mom is more in tune. [She’s] been with them for nine months already. [6 month solo-leave]

The other fathers in this group, however, did not themselves report conventional attitudes about parenting roles. In two families it was explained that mothers did more childcare because the men honoured the women’s desire to be primary caregivers. Another two couples explained their gendered divisions of care as a result of having a stay-at-home parent – regardless of which spouse was with baby. Whether mother’s greater involvement was attributed to mom being at home, or as compensation for not being the one at home, it is the ease and consistency with which mother’s caregiving was taken for granted or justified – not couples’ actual explanations – that is significant here. Despite the men becoming skilled caregivers themselves, the tendency for non-sharers to draw on cultural notions of women as nurturers reveals the strength of cultural norms and structural arrangements impelling families down the gendered paths of least resistance (Miller 2011; see also Fox 2009; Walzer 1998; Singley & Hynes 2005).
In summary, the way participants spoke about their time with baby suggests important differences in how men conceptualize parenting that may impact their future involvement. When fathers are personally committed to caregiving, there is not much reason to avoid sharing the work of childcare, but researchers must be careful not to assume this is true for all leave-takers. If fathers consider their time with baby discretionary, not only are conventional parenting ideologies from one or both partners likely, but parents may inadvertently fall into gendered patterns. Considering the motivation behind the parenting arrangements couples adopt captures this distinction: Fully 15 of the 17 men who were passionate about taking parental leave, compared to only 7 of the 13 who took leave because of the couple’s financial or employment circumstances, shared childcare – see table 6. Although a lack of sharing was not exclusive to the circumstantial leave-takers, the data reveal that there was more room for conventional practices to take root in the absence of men’s strong commitment to hands-on childcare. Though participants became skilled caregivers during their time at home, this was itself not enough to motivate the men’s subsequent childcare, if personal commitments remained dispassionate.

Table 6: Fathers’ Participation in Childcare Post-Parental Leave by Reason for Leave-Taking

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason for leave-taking</th>
<th>Shared Equally</th>
<th>More or Mostly Wife</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Desire</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Circumstances</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.4.2 Duty to Clean?

Although some participants shared the tasks involved in daily household upkeep (n = 11), at the time of the interview, most did not. Housework tended to be divided along gendered lines – much more so than with caregiving As table 7 shows, the strongest pattern was that fathers tended to share childcare but not household tasks (n=14). Participants who would not have been satisfied to let their wives handle the majority of childcare often did so when it came to household tasks without much thought or guilt.
Table 7: Fathers’ Participation in Childcare versus Housework Post-Parental Leave

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Childcare</th>
<th>Housework</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shared Equally</td>
<td>More or Mostly Wife</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childcare</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>22</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More or Mostly</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wife</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>30</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Theorists suggest that the difference in men’s involvement occurs because “childcare is preferred to housework” (Almqvist and Duvander 2014: 25; see also Sullivan 2013). But analyzing how participants explained their divisions of labour suggests this is about more than just preferences – those who eschewed housework had little sense of personal obligation for it. Although a few men in this study reported that they “clean because I want a clean house” or “obsess about getting laundry done and about cleaning and how filthy the house is,” the more common response was to position housework as something the women were more invested in:

Luke: We have different expectation of how clean the house should be. If the baby’s home, you’re playing. Like you can see this week it’s pretty clean but you can tell that a baby lives here and there’s a lot he can get to. If Leanna had her way, this would all be in neat boxes and hidden. Her orderly nature would be taking over…I don’t know, myself, I probably let it go a lot longer than her. [6 month solo leave]

Mitch: I do have standards, but they're so low that they don't really matter. But I, I don't want to live in a pigsty, so we have a cleaning lady who comes once a week and actually cleans stuff. And I do what I need to do to maintain that, my wife's minimum standard. It's an ongoing process. [3 month joint-leave]

Ian: When I actually get the dishes done, I’m happy about that. It’s, I’ve never been one for housework. It’s just not me. It’s good when I get stuff done and make Ivy happy but it’s difficult sometimes. [4.5 month solo leave]

Thus when the men in this study implied they did housework to help their wives, it was generally not because they felt the work was the women’s responsibility. It was because they recognized it was important to their wives in a way that did not resonate with them personally. When asked how they would feel if unexpected guests showed up at their home, for instance, responses were telling: compared to the overwhelming majority of women who said they would be self-conscious, only a handful of men reported the same. Although having the choice of not measuring up to particular standards may be a luxury available to men because they are not the ones being
judged (Beagan et al 2008: 667, Erickson 2005), exercising it can be a condemnation of the
exacting standards women are held to. At the same time, rationalizing women’s housework as a
difference in individual choice, standards, and preferences also gave men in this study the “excuse
they may be looking for” to avoid undesirable household tasks (Deutsch 1999: 59).

Some men, however, took on half the workload because it was “only fair” (n =8). A few fathers
defined “fairness” in terms of a commitment to gender equality, like Brandon, who took a 5
month leave from his IT job in the non-profit sector:

I considered myself a feminist for quite a while, so that's probably part of it. You know, so
then it's just the circles you hang out with. I've also always had sort of this pretty strong
sense of equality, like what's fair, what's not, try to make things fair.

More commonly, however, fairness was defined reciprocally, with couples explaining that they
share because “we both work full time [so] it wouldn’t be fair” or because “it's fair, it's mutual
respect. We're both kind of…we both like a clean home, like one of us isn't a slob.” The men who
shared tended to view household tasks as a ‘necessary evil’ that neither spouse could in good
conscience evade. For a few other fathers involvement was more purposeful however; three men
handled the bulk of housework in order to specifically free up mom’s time with baby. Len, a
youth counsellor who took a ten-month solo leave, exemplified this position:

I’d still be there when Laura came home. I wouldn’t be just like, “Okay, I’m out.” I’d
usually make dinner. I’d do all that stuff so she could just spend quality time with him. So
as soon as she got home, I’d give him over to her just so she had that time as well. And I
tried to back off while that was happening, so I wouldn’t be intruding on her time with him.

In these cases, taking on extra tasks was not a benevolent gesture to their wives or an attempt to
balance the second shift. These fathers handled more housework while conscientiously abstaining
from childcare in order to ensure what was thought best for baby – maternal caregiving.

Thus housework was shared in this study when it was consistent with the men’s ideas about
proper household and family maintenance – and most had the privilege of not thinking much
about it. Examining changes in couples’ allocations of housework overtime, however, suggests
that certain factors could promote fathers’ sense of reciprocal obligation: having taken solo
parental leave and having a wife with an equal or higher income. First, being on leave with their
wives seemed to reduce the likelihood that fathers participated in household work. Some men in
this study (n=9) took on one or more tasks pursuant to their parental leaves, such as making
dinner, keeping food inventory, and doing laundry. Yet as table 8 shows, compared to 14 (of 22) men who took solo leaves, only 2 (of 8) men who shared leave either continued sharing or increased their workload. The rest either reduced their participation in housework, or retained already unequal divisions of tasks. The way these participants spoke about their time on leave suggests a unique dynamic that promoted gendered divisions of housework.

Table 8: Fathers’ Housework Involvement Post-Parental Leave by Leave Circumstances

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Men’s Housework Involvement</th>
<th>How Leave Taken</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Solo</td>
<td>Joint</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continued Sharing</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased Workload</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decreased Workload</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remained Unequal</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>22</strong></td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At the outset, the reasons fathers took parental leave had implications for their involvement. Couples’ pursuit of family time, for instance, was enacted differently than a man’s desire to bond with baby—especially if modelled after their wives’ time on leave. Dylan, an architect who took a three month solo leave, exemplified this approach: “I tried to have dinner ready for Denise when she got home. The house was always clean, so I tried to do what she did for me when she was off.” In contrast, men who took joint leaves took for granted that their wives would be directing the experience, commenting that “I didn't think I was going to be the primary parent anyway” or “I knew my role would be a supporting role and that is what it has become.” Whether intending to play second fiddle or not, the gendered arrangements couples developed while sharing leave time tended to reify the notion of mothers as primary. As those who spent time in both shared and solo care elucidated, being home with a spouse meant never experiencing the full weight of mental or physical responsibility involved in managing household and family:

Cory: I was good at it. I was good when it was time for me to be. I found it weird, being we’re both home, you [to his wife] took on more than I did. It was like, once you’re, you were back at work, then I kind of rolled up my sleeves. [3 month solo leave]

Dylan: When I was off with my daughter and I was on my own, it was a whole other world. I didn't have that extra help. That’s when I realized that it's taxing, extremely taxing. And I didn't get the same feeling when I was off with my wife. So it's, dads that share the leave are not getting the same experience at all. It's not, you can't even compare it. [3 month joint- & solo-leaves]
Thus time spent at home with a spouse during the early weeks and months of parenthood may actually solidify parental inequalities if fathers’ secondary role is presumed and routinized.

Second, higher earning women were more likely to have husbands who shared the housework. In this study, women who earned salaries equal to or higher than their husbands made up 63% of the sample (19 of 30 couples), but as table 9 indicates, featured much more prominently than those with lower earnings in families where the men increased their workload and those that continued to divide housework equally.

Table 9: Fathers’ Housework Involvement Post-Parental Leave by Spouse’s Earnings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Men’s Housework Involvement</th>
<th>Women’s Relative Earnings</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Equal or higher</td>
<td>Lower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continued Sharing</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased Workload</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decreased Workload</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remained Unequal</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Relative resource theories suggests that the stronger women’s commitment to the labor force and the higher their earnings relative to those of their partner, the more they can avoid domestic activities that are unpleasant – such as housework (Raley, Bianchi & Wang 2012; Bianchi, Milkie, Sayer & Robinson 2000; Treas & Tais 2012; Fuwa 2004). Though the bargaining process was not commonly discussed by participants, there was some support for it:

Greg: When considering the financial aspect of it, I have to pull my weight because Gabrielle…and she has even brought this up, that she doesn’t have to do as much because she makes more money so I have to fill the gap. [3 month solo leave]

Gabrielle: I don’t want it to sound like I’m saying I don’t have to. It’s, I don’t have the bandwidth to do anything else. I’m gone 10.5 to 11 hours per day because of my job and because of my commute and so I just don’t have that time. [9 month solo leave]

Austen: In terms of Audrey making more money, I mean, I guess there are times when there is tension about that. She will pull rank every once in a while. Like I’m looking for a different job and I would welcome a certain amount of travel, but her pushback is, “You know a week here and there’s fine, but if it’s going to be more, I can’t be the one making most of the money and also doing most of the work.” I think it’s reasonable but it does, that’s how sort of money plays into that discussion.
More commonly, the significance of women’s careers were raised in less direct ways, pertaining to the negotiation of parental leave. Participants’ explanations of how they divided the leave time made it clear that only when women were drawn back to their education or career before the end of the first year of parenthood were couples able to reduce their stake in conventional parenting roles and grant fathers’ longer parental leaves.

In summary, housework was handled quite differently than childcare in this study. In contrast to the import placed on spending time with one’s children, the majority of fathers paid household chores little mind. Few men abstained from housework outright; they just did enough to satisfy their lower standards. Some did feel the urge to participate - because it came naturally, was “only fair”, or as a strategy to promote their wife’s time with the baby. These fathers remained rare, however, comprising just over a third of the men in this study. Nevertheless, examining how couples’ distribution of tasks changed over time reveals that certain conditions – such as women’s higher incomes and men’s prolonged primary parenting – can make men’s sense of reciprocal duty more likely, even if the gendered meaning of housework are not questioned.

4.4.3 Duty to Plan?

Despite increases in men’s participation in both caregiving and housework over the last thirty years, women retain responsibility for managing childcare activities (Doucet 2001; Fox 2009) as well as noticing and delegating when household chores need to be done (Coltrane 2000; Devault 1991). In this study, the distribution of household responsibility was found to be as unequal as the performance of housework tasks – women did the bulk of each in 19 of 30 couples. The way couples handled childcare responsibility differed significantly from the tendency towards shared caregiving, however – see table 10. Whereas only eight couples in the sample did not share the practical tasks of childcare, 16 did not share in the decision-making concerning their children. This means that a number of men who were highly involved in caregiving left the responsibility for coordinating this care to their spouses. Surprisingly, the opposite was also true: some fathers were highly involved when it came to planning for children’s needs, but not their daily care. Analyzing these patterns reveals that fathers’ responsibility-taking hinged on the interaction of two factors: the extent to which the men’s parenting was a goal-oriented project and how the women experienced cultural expectations of maternal care.
For some men, it was the hardships experienced growing up with absent fathers that led them to commit themselves to being involved in all aspects of their children’s upbringing. For others, being tuned into planning reflected fathers’ investment in intensive or hyper-parenting (Hoffman 2010; Hays 1996; Wall 2010), in which a tremendous amount of time, energy, and money are spent to achieve the best possible outcomes for their children. One participant summed up this approach: “We put a lot of time into it. We put a lot of energy and a lot effort into it, to be good at it. And to put our kids into place to be successful and to be good people.” Although many fathers who had prolonged primary responsibility for their children developed a “need-oriented care practice” (Brandth & Kvande 2016) in which fathers learned to respond conscientiously to the unmitigated demands of their child, less were aware of the kind of bigger picture planning and orchestrating referred to by their wives. In contrast to the common reference to fathers’ lower housework standards, responsibility-taking tended to be an all or nothing endeavour – often completely off men’s radar:

Dara: A lot of the keeping the family running stuff, like when’s the doctor appointments, we need to get family photos so we should schedule those, when are we going to start Christmas shopping, and planning for birthday parties and stuff like that, that I’ve always managed. So, on a, I don’t want to call it a superficial level, but optically, who changes the diapers and bathes the kids and whatever, that’s totally shared by the two of us. But the base stuff that still needs to happen, like planning for birthday parties and whatever, I do all of that. I’m like the family CEO. [9 month solo leave]

Audrey: We were talking about the possibility of having a nanny versus daycare and I remember saying, ‘if we do daycare you are going to have to help with more stuff’ because I can’t do everything and work longer hours.’ He said, ‘what are you talking about? We do equal things around the house.’ And I said, ‘no I do this, this, this, and this.’ And he was like, ‘well I didn’t know you did those things’ and it was so strange that this is what the conversation would lead to. How could you not know and how could you not think about who is doing them? Like how are they happening? [8 month solo leave]
To understand why the mental work of childcare could be alien for fathers yet pressing for their wives, Doucet (2001, 2009) argues that men and women internalize a moral sense of what they should do as parents, but these expectations remain persistently gendered (see also Shirani, Henwood & Coltart 2012). Indeed, an awareness of different standards was expressed consistently by couples in this study. As one father explained: “That was one way in which it was much easier to be the man I think. Cause people thought it was miraculous that the baby was still alive and baby was clean.” In contrast, women had to be “concerned about what other moms were doing and everything, like, ‘mompetition.’ Like everyone's like, ’you got them in this program? You got them doing this? Like, your kid's at this level? They're doing this at this age?” Even when men and women were both personally committed to parenthood, the stakes were higher for mothers because, unlike for men, implicit in women’s investment in parenthood is the belief that a child’s emotional and physical well-being is ultimately dependent on their caring behavior (McMahon 1995: 233). Feelings of maternal culpability were indeed high amongst some women:

Rebecca: [My son] Ryan has ADHD. And I think, is it my fault? Did I do something wrong? Did I let him watch too much TV? I look back at when he was, even in the womb. I think, you know, was it this? Was it that? You know, and the doctor keeps saying, “No, it's nothing. You have no control over it.” But I guess I still feel that ultimately I'm responsible for the way he turned out. [7 month solo leave]

In contrast, few, if any fathers exhibited anxiety over what they should be doing or feeling as parents – the hallmark of intensive mothering (Hays 1996; Wall 2010). Not only did fathers seem to be “immune” to the pressure of cultural expectations (Shirani, Henwood & Coltart 2012: 37), but I found some of the mothers felt them acutely – the women who violated norms of maternal caregiving by relinquishing parental leave or being dedicated to demanding careers:

Bethany: Like I joke that my metric for successful work/life balance is like you’re letting everyone down equally. Not putting as much time as I should at work, and not doing everything I should at home, like I’m missing the Halloween parade at school...So I do sort of feel, like I feel guilt in letting people down all the time. [7 month solo leave]

Renee: I still think that women, you know, moms, experience guilt, so much more than men do. I don't know why. I mean we both had moments where we feel badly about how we handled something with the kids, right? But I feel guilty about everything. Like, I feel guilty about enjoying my work. I feel guilty about, you know, wanting to take time for myself ever, you know. Like, I feel guilty about all these things, right. Whereas I don't really hear that from men. Not that I talk to them a lot about this stuff. But, you know, with women, you hear it weaved into every conversation, right. But with men I don't get that. [6 month solo leave]
The profound sense of guilt articulated by these women is noteworthy because it was absent from the narratives of most mothers and all fathers. And because it seemed to be associated with increased responsibility-taking that could not otherwise be explained. Of the couples with the most extreme differences in participation (fully shared caregiving but minimal responsibility), two of the men were on lengthy solo leaves (average 6.8 months) and the other three had some of the most egalitarian attitudes in the sample. With neither fathers’ ideas nor circumstances accounting for their lack of involvement, it’s possible the women were intensely involved as compensation for not meeting cultural standards of “good mothering.” Guilt featured prominently for mothers who felt unsure they should be as attached to their careers as they were. Whereas men’s employment was taken for granted, emphasizing the obligatory nature of their own paid work was thus one way the women could free themselves from feelings of caregiving culpability. As one woman put it: “The fact is that our lifestyle is dependent on both of our incomes so I kind of absolve myself of the guilt that I’m putting my needs first.” Another described how she fantasized about getting “out of marketing and chang[ing] the world. And then you realize that you need your job to pay the bills and you don’t really want to stay at home and volunteer with the kids and whatever.” Whereas women who worked part-time, from home, or had workplace flexibility, seemed able to fulfill norms of both dual earning and maternal care, those committed to demanding careers could not shake the feeling that they were doing something wrong:

Sadie: For me, the biggest challenge was feeling like this dramatic loss of identity in terms of being anything except a mom and not being able to remember what it was like before. And feeling guilty that I felt badly about that. Like all I should want in the whole world is to be with this little person 24/7? That guilt. [6 month solo leave]

Patricia: For all that we are unusual in that we earn the same amount of money and you do more than the average, you do your share of the housework, all that sort of stuff, it still feels to me like my career is more - not because you make me feel this way - but just that, maybe its culturally engrained or something, that my… like I would never expect you to settle, but I always feel like I am on the fence about, should I stay in this job? Should I find a job that requires less time at work so I can do more stuff around the house? Should I at some point become a stay at home parent? Whereas I don’t feel like that’s ever on the table for your consideration. [8 month solo leave]

Paul: No, it’s not [4 month solo leave]

The ways participants spoke about orchestrating caregiving suggests that men and women’s different experiences of, and responses to, the “shoulds” of parenting promoted a gendered division of responsibility amongst participants (see also Fox 2009; Shirani, Coltart & Henwood
All of the participants in this study cared about their children’s growth and development, yet some appeared to be more personally invested in its accomplishment. Gendered divisions of responsibility transpired when fathers’ indifference was coupled with mothers’ heightened sense of moral obligation to be in control of their children’s lives. In contrast, this mental work was shared when cultural expectations were less poignant for women and taking a managerial role in family life was important to men.

4.5 Conclusions

This research brings to light the complex and variable arrangements of managing family life present amongst a sample of Canadian couples in which fathers took parental leave for at least six weeks. All participants shared the common experience of being at home during the early stages of their children’s lives, yet only childcare was shared by a majority of couples (22/30). Men’s participation in housework tasks and their thinking about and planning for familial care lagged considerably behind (shared by 11/30 and 14/30 of couples, respectively). These findings speak to the intricate, dynamic, and persistently gendered nature of meeting family needs. By examining how participants made sense of their arrangements using interactive research methods, it became clear that fathers’ leave-taking was itself not enough to equalize participation in domestic labour and responsibility because the way couples allocated the work of running a family was contingent on the men’s sense of duty to each – a personal disposition enacted in concert with a spouse against a backdrop of cultural ideas about proper family roles.

In this study, the length of fathers’ leave was not necessarily linked to subsequent gender equality in care-work, contradicting previous findings (Chronholm 2004; Haas & Hwang 2008; Seward et al. 2006; Nepomnyaschy and Waldfogel 2007). Rather full participation in childcare was largely explained by a sense of personal commitment to caregiving, as captured by examining participants’ motivations for leave-taking. Men who were dedicated to caregiving – and took leave for this reason – had little reason to avoid sharing the work of childcare. In contrast, when men’s leave-taking was a practical solution to a couple’s financial or employment circumstances, gendered care arrangements were more likely. Although a few non-sharers had traditional beliefs about men and women’s proper roles, more commonly, the cultural forces impelling families down the gendered paths of least resistance loomed larger in the absence of fathers’ strong commitment to caregiving.
Whereas fathers tended to be equal caregivers when this fulfilled an individual desire to be intimately involved in their children’s’ lives, few participants felt personally drawn to housework. Although there were some men who shared these tasks with their spouses – because it was only “fair,” a proclivity for cleaning, or in order to free up their wives’ time with the baby – the majority did not worry too much about who would be picking up the slack. Non-sharing men rationalized their lesser involvement as resulting from differing individual inclinations, without much awareness of how gendered cultural expectations made this privilege possible or precluded women from doing the same. In contrast, managing children’s lives was not even on the radar of most fathers in this study. Even amongst participants who were fully committed to childcare, fathers felt little obligation to be involved in keeping diaper inventory, scheduling doctor’s check-ups, or planning birthday parties. Less tangible than housework, this kind of thinking and planning was easy for the men to overlook without a personal stake in its accomplishment.

Although some men were invested in making decisions about their children’s lives – because of a commitment to right the wrongs of their own childhood or achieve the best possible outcome for their offspring – this decision was personal. In contrast, cultural expectations of maternal culpability meant the women felt compelled to manage their children’s lives – especially if they felt guilty about their commitment to their careers.

The lack of moral anxiety about proper fathering, in conjunction with men’s elective approach to housework, despite having taken parental leave, reveal the extent to which gendered norms remain entrenched within families and broader society. Nevertheless, I observed that certain conditions were present amongst couples who shared the workload. Men who acted as the primary caregiver while on leave or had a wife who was an equal or higher income earner tended to have greater involvement in housework, for instance. Thus particular material circumstances may activate or encourage a sense of duty towards household upkeep that can ultimately lead to greater gender equality in families. Getting fathers thinking about (versus doing) caregiving was more complex. Looking at couples with the most extreme differences in fathers’ participation suggests this may hinge not only on a vested interest from men, but also a reduced commitment from women. When mothers were on leave or worked part-time they were more likely to manage childcare. Yet curiously so too were women who had little time with their children – those who were committed to demanding careers or had husbands who were on parental leave. This suggests that the pressures of intensive mothering were felt more acutely by some women; taking
responsibility for children’s lives may be an attempt at managing uneasiness over violating gendered parenting expectations by investing in the public presentation of ‘good mothering.’

Increased workplace or government supports for balancing work and family could therefore help alleviate some of the pressures pushing women towards assuming responsibility at home. Specific cultural attention to men’s involvement may also increase men’s sense of obligation – if fathers come to be held more accountable for children’s development. Although far from being fully realized, the potential of changing norms is evident with regards to housework. Despite a lack of individual interest, men in this study did not avoid these tasks entirely. Fathers tended to rationalize their lesser involvement, but there was a shared recognition that they “should” participate. If we assume that the minimum threshold for acceptable involvement can be raised, then public policy campaigns targeting fathers could provide the moral compulsion needed to encourage men’s’ sense of duty in areas they currently feel minimally responsible for.

To conclude, while some theorists argue that the key to fathers’ equal involvement is structuring their initial experiences of parenthood similar to women’s – that is “freed of workplace responsibilities and fully engaged in parenting” (Rehel 2014:126; Gornick & Myers 2008) – this research makes it clear that a ‘Field of Dreams’ approach to involved fathering is oversimplified. As demonstrated, men’s engagement in caregiving and housework depended heavily on their commitments to each aspect of meeting family needs. Leave-taking was just one factor in the complex interplay of individual interests and material circumstances that were involved. Despite the experience of being at home with one’s child during the early period of parenthood, fathers’ minimal sense of duty towards household tasks and caregiving responsibility, and thus conventional arrangements, reigned. Yet participants also presented a remarkable dedication to the care of their children, and it was found that leave-taking could promote a man’s sense of obligation towards meeting other family needs under certain circumstances. The transformative potential of father’s time at home thus should not be dismissed. Even “slow drippings of change” (Sullivan 2006: 15-16) represent an unsettling of gendered parenting, which can contribute to shifting cultural attitudes surrounding family roles over time. As fathers are increasingly held to the same parenting standards as mothers by their familial circumstances and others’ expectations, this research suggests this will not only cultivate men’s sense of obligation towards domestic labour and responsibility, but also relieve some of the pressure felt by women,
Chapter 5
Conclusions

Although I came into this research project assuming I would largely be hearing from progressive men who took parental leave because of their commitment to gender equality, I was surprised by how rarely this was true. Just under half of participants took leave because it was the best practical solution for their individual circumstances, and would have preferred or assumed the best option was for the women to stay home. Even those who very much wanted to share parental leave tended to do so because of a commitment to their child, not to fairness. Although a few men in this study made reference to the social benefits and importance of men sharing caregiving equally with women, a feminist consciousness was quite rare. Gender equality was not participants’ goal, yet I was struck by how much some fathers spent their time, and sounded, like mothers. While on parental leave the men played with baby, went for walks, took outings to the museum or art gallery, participated in baby music or swim classes, and got together with neighbourhood parents. They also dealt with the more unruly aspects of parenting such as changing diapers or messes not contained by them, cleaning spit up, bathing baby, rocking them to sleep, feeding reluctant eaters, cleaning up after messy meals, and trying to pacify fussy babies.

While nearly all fathers in the sample discussed the drudgery of physical care, many also became aware of, and felt acutely, the mental burden and loss of autonomy demanded by primary caregiving. As they detailed how they attentively handled timing naps, packing the diaper bag for an outing, making pureed food for lunch, reading up on developmental milestones, or deciding when a call to the doctor was warranted, participants themselves recognized the full-time nature of responsibility as being the most socializing aspect of staying home and caring for the baby. Not being able to rely on one’s spouse to handle decision-making was what transformed many of the men in this study into equal primary caregivers – even if this was not their intention. The more fathers took ownership over and responsibility for their children’s care, the more they felt themselves changed by the experience. The men discussed how they had become more patient, compassionate, and nurturing – overall more well-rounded and in touch with their feminine sides – with a new awareness of the importance of protecting children’s innocence and vulnerability. That is, they conveyed the same kind of moral transformation that women experience and claim in becoming first-time mothers (McMahon 1995).
The changes noted amongst participants begs the question of the significance of fathers’ leave-taking and time spent caring while off work: Does men’s involvement in the early weeks and months of parenthood promote change in ways that can reduce gender inequality? In line with my findings, studies on men who are immersed in caregiving consistently show remarkable personal transformation and growth. Doucet (2006), Lee and Lee (2018), Chesley (2010) and Solomon (2014) all report, for instance, that being stay-at-home fathers profoundly changes men, who come to develop strong bonds with their children, embrace their ‘emotional sides’, and appreciate the value of care work. Even those whose immersion in caregiving is less total can experience their time at home as transformative. Parental leave has been found to enable fathers to develop a closer emotional relationship with their children (Chronholm 2004; Haas & Hwang 2008; Pleck 1997; Seward et al 2006). Especially when on leave alone, fathers describe their learning process as going beyond that of being a ‘helper’ to spending quantity time getting to know their child and responding to their needs thus putting the idea that the mother is the natural caregiver into question (Wall 2014; Brandth & Kvande 2013; 2003). These findings are supported by research on the emergence of a unique consciousness embodying an ethics of care that emerges from maternal practice, such as when post-divorce fathers are no longer able to rely on a spouse to manage and do the bulk of caregiving (Philip 2014, 2013).

Although men clearly respond effectively and affectively when presented with the opportunity or required by circumstances to be deeply immersed in caregiving, there remains a deeply marked division between moral expectations for mothers and fathers that cannot be overlooked (Doucet 2006: 220). The choices and actions of men and women as they balance paid work and family life must be situated in a wider set of social relations where women’s and men’s lives are structured differently (Doucet 2006: 192; Fox 2009). Indeed, Sullivan (2004: 211) problematizes change that may occur at the level of the household, but not beyond:

If an increase in husbands’ housework occurs as an ad hoc response to practical contingencies (such as a wife moving into full-time employment), while it may certainly be significant for the women who experience it, it may not necessarily indicate deeper change at the ideological or structural level.

Here Sullivan (2004) is specifying the limits of change: simply practicing gender differently is not enough if unaccompanied by larger transformations that rectify the ways women are constrained in contemporary society (211). The question, ultimately, is about the relationship
between agency and individual behaviour on the one hand, and the way institutions are organized on the other, and it is one that I engage with in this chapter. By addressing three themes raised by Sullivan, I will review the findings of my research, frame the discussion of its significance, and ultimately propose a theory of change that recognizes the value of various interactional dynamics.

5.1 Motivating Fathers’ Involvement

First is the question of the motivations behind non-conventional arrangements. Fathers’ intentions are important to consider because of the “underlying implication of progressive change” that can accompany shifting household practices assumed to reflect increasing emphasis on gender equality (Sullivan 2004: 211). Although I initially shared the assumption that these men are the bearers of a ‘new’ fatherhood based on an ideology of egalitarianism (see Holter 2007; Johansson 2011), almost half the fathers in this study didn’t want to take parental leave and would have deferred to maternal caregiving if feasible. Although none of these men went as far as admitting to being uninterested in time with baby, the consensus among many of the mothers and fathers in this group was that women are naturally suited to caregiving in a way that made men’s leave-taking seem somewhat superfluous. Rather than reflecting “new men” committed to gender equality (Holter 2007), the rest of the men took leave because of their strong personal desire to be involved with their children (Bekkengen 2006; Almqvist 2008). Although these participants would not give up their share of the parental leave without a fight, the amount of time they felt was fair was heavily shaped by the ideal of maternal caregiving, leading most to be grateful to be allotted anything over 2-3 months of leave time.

With men’s leave-taking more reflective of circumstances or a “child-oriented masculinity” than the efforts of “gender-equal men” in this study (Bekkengen 2006; Almqvist 2008), it is clear that we must be cautious about presuming the motivation behind actions. Even though – or perhaps especially because – couples arrived at atypical arrangements embodying ideals of ‘new fatherhood,’ they had to negotiate with pressures around both men and women’s proper roles as they divided, spent their time on, and made sense of parental leave. The tension between convention and change is echoed in the literature: Fathers have been found to hold onto conventional masculine identities even as they take on feminine care work. The men in Doucet’s (2006: 196) study, for instance, actively worked “to dispel the idea that they might be gay, un-
masculine or not men” by emphasizing their continued attachment to breadwinning as well as the masculine qualities of their caregiving, such as promoting risk-taking and teaching the child independence (see also Chesley 2010; Brandth & Kvande 1998; Wilson & Prior 2010). Reframing the home as a site of building or self-provisioning rather than a locus of care, and avoiding housework, are other strategies men in non-conventional arrangements use to shore up their masculinity (Doucet 2006; Brandth & Kvande 1998; Almqvist 2008).

Yet uneasiness about not enacting proper family roles is not exclusive to men: working mothers have been found to cut back their employment, make less money, do more domestic work, and invest heavily in the public presentation of their good mothering in order to manage guilt over not meeting expectations of intensive parenting (Doucet 2006; Chesley 2010; Walzer 1998). That couples may be reproducing gendered relations even as they challenged conventional parenting arrangements makes it clear that fathers’ involvement cannot be presumed to correspond with greater equality (Leira 2002). Yet a persistent focus on what does not change can write off as insignificant the small, slow changes in gender relations that may be taking place (Ranson 2012; see also Sullivan 2004; Deutsch 2007; Risman 2004).

5.2 Defining Change

The question of what counts as change is the second theme raised by Sullivan’s work (2004; 2006), that I would like to address. Although men’s child orientation may be more a question of their “picking out the good bits” than of a radical transformation of conventional roles, perhaps we can view men’s increased interest in caring for their children as a step towards a changed and more gender equal parenthood and a sign of changes taking place within hegemonic masculinity (Johansson 2011: 166; see also Brandth & Kvande 2009). With inequality posed as “an all-or-nothing issue” (Connell 1987: 60), there has been some reluctance to accept the significance of changes within the household, however. Sullivan (2004; 2006) argues that the dominant theoretical approaches have led to an emphasis on stasis in couple-level gender relations. Because early feminists located gender inequality in the structure of society, for instance, this meant no meaningful change in the domestic realm could be conceived without a fundamental upheaval to patriarchal social relations (Sullivan 2004: 211).
The important contribution of social constructionist theories of gender was thus to draw attention to the ways gender is an accomplishment that is created and re-created in social interaction (Deutsch 2007: 109). Yet Deutsch (2007) argues that the deterministic emphasis on accountability and language of the “doing gender” approach (West & Zimmerman 1987) are largely incompatible with a theory of change; research from this perspective has tended to focus on how gender differences are constructed and preserved. How then can we examine social interaction as a site of change? We need a theoretical approach that recognizes the simultaneously constituted and constitutive nature of day-to-day interactions in which practices are linked to wider social processes occurring at the institutional level (Sullivan 2004; Connell 2002). Here institutions are conceived as enduring social structures which feature a specific set of expectations or rules that embodied agents enact through practices distinct to that realm, such as family, religion, or the workplace (Martin 2004; Risman 2004). Although, interactions often reproduce the social order from which they emerge by conforming to the established pattern of relations between men and women embedded in social organizations, an “integrative approach” that treats gender “as a socially constructed stratification system” presents the opportunity to study the conditions under which conventional gendered behaviour is resisted and the ways this can facilitate broader change (Risman 2004: 430; Connell 2002). This is because under this theorization, gender as a social structure cannot exist without the daily interactions which sustain it (Lorber 1994). Although the sexual division of labour that organizes family life is recognized as particularly enduring, limiting, and pressing, because practice is innovative and reflexive, it can be turned against what constrains it in a move that ultimately transforms the existing structure. With reshaped normative conceptions of gender becoming the object of practice, social institutions can be changed if the social interactions that support them are changed (Connell 1987: 95; Deutsch 2007).

5.2.1 Struggling for Change?

For Sullivan (2004; 2006), the concept of “gender consciousness” provides the framework for understanding the recursive connection between day-to-day struggles and negotiations – such as those around the domestic division of labour – and broader social change (Gerson & Peiss 1985). In my research however, conflict guided by or resulting in a political awareness of gender issues was rare. In chapter two, I discuss how only a handful of participants struggled over how to divide parental leave, for instance. No women in this study pressed their husbands to take
parental leave. Even when women recognized the importance of getting fathers involved in domestic labour and responsibility early on, they couldn’t shake the feeling that they “should” be the ones at home with baby. There was moral weight attached to maternal caregiving, thus the only time a father’s desire took precedence over his spouse’s was when mothers who preferred not to share felt they could not fully deny the men’s leave-taking. Two men secured themselves six weeks of parental leave in this manner. Most couples in my study, however, did not struggle. They divided parental leave according to what “made sense” – and mothers’ entitlement prevailed. When fathers wanted to take parental leave conflict was avoided because both spouses tended to agree the leave was more rightfully hers to use and so the men’s time at home was curtailed. The logic became economic or based on other necessity when couples could not sustain women’s leave-taking because of their circumstances.

A father’s time with baby was only prioritized when both partners were ideologically committed to sharing. Otherwise, in the rare cases it was voiced, men’s desire for half of the parental leave was collaboratively squashed. Though some fathers exhibited a feminist consciousness by challenging the idea of mothers as rightful caregivers, they ended up supporting mothers’ time with baby by agreeing to reduce their share of leave time enough to accommodate the couple’s mutual desire to promote breastfeeding. And the number of months allocated to mom often coincided with optimal timing in regards to the women’s work calendars at that point. A husband’s time at home was extended only if a mother’s work, education, or commitment to equality took precedence over her feelings of leave-entitlement. However, if a woman’s career dedication coincided with a man’s employment top-up, even couples inclined to take maternal caregiving for granted could be steered away from the “logic of gendered choices” channeling couples towards conventional practices (Risman 1998: 29).

Although the couples in this research were breaking new ground with fathers’ leave-taking, they didn’t think much about the social importance of their choices. The men had a very undeveloped – if any – conception of gender equality and the women’s strong sense of entitlement to be the ones at home overwhelmingly supported maternal caregiving as the default. This does not mean couples’ allocations of parental leave should be interpreted simply as instances of “doing gender,” however. Although conforming to conventional ideals even as they took up atypical arrangements largely inhibited the kind of interpersonal conflict and feminist consciousness that Sullivan (2004; 2006) suggests is needed to spark real change, I argue that having men at home
at the transition to parenthood still represents a significant rejigging of family roles. With gender central to the organization of family life, any undertaking that modifies conventional arrangements – especially if it has the potential to be wide reaching – is important. Though struggling for equality is an important way gender relations are changed, it is not the only way. Without an identifiable threshold for when change can be deemed to occur, Deutsch (2007) and Risman (2009) suggest that the process can be more diffuse: even if not politically minded, the transgression of gender norms in social interaction can inspire gender consciousness in others or contribute to a more general weakening of the currency of gender norms.

5.2.2 Interactional Dynamics

With fathers’ leave-taking representing relatively uncharted territory ripe with gendered meanings, the arrangements couples came up with while on leave and subsequent to it were at the crossroads of conformity and challenge that played out in curious ways. As much as fathers’ time at home during the early weeks and months of parenthood is progressive, for instance, negotiations about how best to allocate this time strongly favoured maternal caregiving. Yet whereas occupational resources, such as high earnings and job prestige, tend to be conceived as important tools for women to gain bargaining power in the domestic sphere (Hochschild 1989; Luxton 2009; Fox 2009), in this situation they supported their career attachment and thus men’s leave-taking. My discussions of chapters three and four below will elaborate on the interactional dynamics underlying men’s leave-taking in order to highlight the unintended ways that gender equality can be promoted in families even in the absence of a “gender consciousness” (Sullivan 2004; Gerson & Peiss 198).

Chapter three of this dissertation examines the day-to-day reality of men’s caregiving and how time with baby may be personally and socially transformative. I argue that both the content and context of men’s parenting is important to this process. First, the greater the hands-on involvement – especially as solo caregivers – that men have in the early weeks and months of parenthood, the more likely they were to feel personally moved by their time with baby. And the more they experienced parenting as rewarding, the more likely they were to vest a new sense of self in the values of interdependence and nurturing. This was likely true, however, only when men felt the risks to one’s sense of self were low. The second factor promoting or inhibiting the incorporation of parenting into men’s self-concepts was thus the cultural context, involving
expectations of intensive mothering and men’s breadwinning. I suggest that participants felt themselves changed only because they were insulated from the intense pressure to parent the ‘right’ way that is placed on mothers, while simultaneously embodying ideals of hegemonic masculinity. Although a handful of fathers who did not feel accomplished in their careers were able to feel unreservedly good about being caregivers because they had already come to terms with ‘failing’ at masculinity, paradoxically, nurturing became constitutive of self for the majority because of the ubiquity of gendered cultural expectations privileging breadwinning and the temporary break from work which allowed most men to continue meeting them. Those who could (subjectively) neither securely anchor nor renounce their ties to conventional masculinity were the ones who were uncomfortable being on parental leave. Thus whereas access to “resources of masculinity” (Doucet 2006: 203) can enable the development of moral caregiving identities, these findings suggest that if fathers came to be held to the same parenting standards as mothers, the values and practices of care may not be so easily embraced.

In chapter four, I consider the implications of men’s leave-taking by examining patterns in participants’ involvement in social reproductive labour and how the men themselves understand and explain their participation. Despite the common experience of taking parental leave, I found considerable variation in the ways couples subsequently managed domestic labour and responsibility. It became clear that whether fathers were involved in caregiving, household upkeep, or the thinking and planning involved in each was contingent on how heavily invested the men were personally in each. This conclusion may seem obvious, but calls attention to the discretion men exercise in their domestic involvement and how this can be shaped by the circumstances of leave-taking and family life, changing cultural expectations, and men’s identity commitments as fathers or spouses.

In terms of caregiving, the vast majority of couples reported that fathers were as involved in the tasks of childcare as their partners. Ambivalence towards sharing this work was more likely amongst the shortest and longest leave-takers, however – those who were pushed by circumstances to share parental leave. Sometimes this was expressed as the deliberate prioritization of maternal caregiving by one or both spouses, but more likely the non-sharers found themselves unintentionally following the gendered paths of least resistance when it came to parenting. Although a lack of shared caregiving was not exclusive to this group, the data reveal that there was far more room for conventional practices to take root in the absence of
men’s strong commitment to hands-on childcare. Nevertheless, just over half of the men who took leave as a practical solution later came to divide childcare equally, suggesting that time with baby can foster a sense of dedication to the care of their children even for men that would otherwise default to maternal caregiving.

In contrast to the widespread prioritization of, and participation in, caregiving, few participants felt personally drawn to housework. Although some men shared the tasks involved in daily household upkeep because of their penchant for cleaning, housework tended to be discussed as something the women were more invested in. This framing may be a condemnation of the standards women (feel they) are held hostage to, but it also excuses men from undesirable work. Yet a third of the men took on half or more the load because it was “only fair.” Definitions of fairness ranged from a broad awareness of gender inequality, to local conceptions of reciprocity with one’s spouse, to prioritizing a child’s access to maternal caregiving. Although most men exercised the privilege of not thinking too much about housework, certain factors could influence fathers’ sense of obligation. First, women who had incomes equal or higher to their husbands’ had more bargaining power. This could be exercised subtly by prioritizing their career during leave negotiations, thereby reducing a couples’ stake in conventional roles, or more directly by demanding men’s increased participation in household work. Second, being on leave with a spouse had the opposite effect – it seemed to reduce the likelihood that fathers participated in household work as both spouses took for granted that the women would be directing the experience and thus fathers’ secondary position became routinized.

The allocation of the thinking about (versus doing) caregiving was more complex. I found that fathers’ awareness of, and thus likelihood of participation in, bigger picture planning hinged on the interaction of two factors: the extent to which the men’s parenting was a goal-oriented project and how the women experienced cultural expectations around maternal care. When a man’s desire to take a managerial role in family life coincided with a woman’s lack of anxiety over meeting standards of intensive mothering, the mental work of childcare was more likely to be shared. In contrast, for just over half of couples in this study, a gendered division of responsibility transpired because fathers’ indifference was coupled with mothers’ heightened sense of moral obligation to be in control of their children’s lives. Paradoxically, those most likely to manage “thinking about the baby” (Walzer 1998) were the women who had little time with their children because of commitments to demanding careers or having husbands who were
at home. Thus despite at times promoting men’s participation in childcare and housework, a woman’s occupational resources could also clash with cultural expectations of intensive mothering, leading some to disproportionately take responsibility for managing their children’s lives as a way to ease the tensions around violating gendered parenting expectations.

5.2.3 Emergent Changes

If I had been looking specifically for the negotiations, conflicts, and struggles that lead to gender consciousness (Sullivan 2004; Gerson & Peiss 1985), the unique dynamics noted above might have been overlooked. Understanding change as a more diffuse and less intentional process makes it possible to theorize about the conditions of family life which can promote “undoing gender” (Deutsch 2007) in ways that might not be anticipated. Though a specific concern about gender equality was largely absent in this sample, participants’ narratives suggest important changes that were rooted in the experience of leave-taking. At the individual level, being at home with and learning to care for baby was found to be very meaningful. Most commonly, the men enthused over the close relationship and strong bonds they developed with their children. For some, a sense of responsibility and ownership over caregiving led to an identity change wherein the values and practices of care became incorporated into their sense of self. Leave-taking can thus be an important way that cultural configurations of acceptable masculinity are transformed and gender inequality deconstructed. Adopting the socially subordinated status of caregiver can be resistance to the gender order if it means giving up some of the privileges of masculinity and risking social ostracism by not conforming to expected masculine roles (Elliott 2016; Hanlon 2012; Kimmel 2010).

Changes were also evident in gender relations at the couple-level. Being on leave led some men to gain an appreciation of the demands of and efforts required by childcare and household upkeep, which encouraged more of a team approach to handling domestic work. Although fathers’ equal involvement in housework and managing responsibility was less common than their participation in caregiving, some men got involved because it was “only fair.” Although a few defined fairness in terms of gender equality, more commonly however, fairness was defined reciprocally – out of concern for one’s partner not doing more than their share. However the sense of obligation was defined, when it led to men’s equal participation in the practical and mental work of childcare and housework, it represents a significant change in gendered roles that
can ultimately be understood as a modification to the institution of family. There was a tangible sense amongst the wives in this study that just knowing the men could step up and perform if necessary – even if the women were the ‘go-to’ caregiver or household manager in their daily lives – was enough to reduce the weight of responsibility on their shoulders. This feeling would not have been forthcoming without men’s leave-taking and the daily immersion in domestic work it provided.

Beyond changes occurring within individuals and families, when men and women see fathers doing domestic work – and hear about the value of deep involvement from them – this may contribute to the larger re-shaping of culturally acceptable gender roles (Hochschild 1989; Shows & Gerstel 2009). The increased visibility of men as caregivers in public over time changes normative definitions of fatherhood. This can be accelerated if men see themselves as dual caregivers when they return to work. Although this was not a theme addressed by the fathers in my study, Chesley (2010) suggests that employees who talk about family at work and emphasize the need for flexibility to meet family needs can loosen the association between women and caregiving and over time reduce or eliminate some of the penalties borne disproportionately by them. Moreover, men in positions of power in organization who have a better understanding of what is involved in raising children and running a household may be more family friendly bosses and managers (Chesley 2010: 658). Chesley (2010) points out that translating involvement into institutional change is possible even when the decision to have fathers at home stems from external factors, such as job loss, relocation, dissatisfaction, instability, or shift work.

Thus, whereas Sullivan (2004) argues that without gender consciousness men doing gender differently may be significant for the women whose burden is reduced, but not necessarily indicative of a step towards larger gender equality, I disagree. Although change might be more robust when thoughts and actions are politically aligned, the alterations in behaviour and consciousness described here confirm that the process of change is not always so straightforward. In this study, it was the strong attachments to their children that impelled fathers to varying levels of domestic involvement. Even without an eye to gender equality, divisions of childcare, housework, responsibility, and accountability could become more equal because leave-taking enabled men to experience the rewards of caregiving first hand. The unifying theme in research on caregiving men, including my own, is thus the value men can come to experience in and place on caregiving, perhaps in contrast to other kinds of domestic involvement (Legerski
and Cornwall 2010; Rochlen et al. 2008; Doucet 2006), even if their non-conventional arrangements are more a matter of circumstance than choice (Chesley 2010; Solomon 2014). In highlighting the transformative capacity of parenting, I argue against a conception of change that relies on gender consciousness (Sullivan 2004; Gerson & Peiss 1985). The differences in, and benefits to, men’s involvement discussed above don’t look any different if motivated by one’s dedication to caregiving or a commitment to gender equality. Such changes, while contributing to the alteration of the gendered nature of parenting over time, may have the opposite effect in the short term, however, if men’s caregiving is venerated. Although I agree that caregiving men are in a distinct position to promote change because they straddle both the privileges of hegemonic masculinity and recognize that daily life can be reproduced in ways that are not so oppressive (Doucet 2006: 242), it also became clear that involved fathering could be practiced in ways that reify male privilege.

5.3 What about Gender Equality?

In this study, fathers did not emphasize a superior approach to caregiving, but they did exercise a level of autonomy not as readily available to women. The difference in how men and women’s parenting practice is constrained is the third and final theme raised by Sullivan (2004; 2006)) that I would like to discuss. She notes a major feminist concern about change at the domestic level has been that women remain constrained by structural inequalities in gender power (Sullivan 2004: 211). In some ways these concerns are not applicable. The number of breadwinning women matched that of breadwinning men in this study, and just less than half the participants only took leave because couples prioritized mothers’ employment circumstances. Although the structural position of women in the labour force may have changed somewhat, in other ways women’s options remain heavily constrained. The demands of cultural ideals around intensive mothering, for instance, mean that women are still those more likely than fathers to “drop out of the labor force, cut back to part-time employment, take less demanding jobs, choose occupations that are more family-friendly, or pass up promotions” (Bianchi, Raley & Wang 2012: 1423). As much as new models of fatherhood have emerged, I would argue that the slow and uneven pace of change sets men’s parenting apart from women’s. As Daly (1993) explains, with the association of masculinity and breadwinning loosening, men who are without clear reference points in terms of culture or personal experience are put into a position of having to creatively negotiate new rules for their fathering. The requirements of “good mothering,” in contrast, have
heightened in recent generations (Hays 1996; Wall 2010). Whereas maternal responsibility, when it is socially expected, is profoundly socializing as women come to claim mothering identities that affirm the cultural ideals of womanhood (McMahon 1995: 234), without culturally engrained gendered meanings linking men to caregiving, fathers are both freer to set the terms of their involvement and to makes sense of it in ways than mothers are. Although men’s greater leeway places fathers in a position where they are able to alleviate the burdens of intensive parenting culture on women, men’s immunity to anxieties over parenting the ‘right way’ may actually increase the pressure felt by women (Shirani, Henwood & Coltart 2012: 37).

This finding was supported in my research. Participants took pride in not being the conventional breadwinning fathers of past generations, but without the pressure of role models or clear expectations of what it means to be ‘involved’ (Dermott 2003, Williams 2008), fathers themselves chose the extent of their participation. Moved by their husbands’ often deep commitment to and appreciation of caregiving, support for men’s involvement seemed to take precedence over concerns about inequalities in other aspects of domestic work. Indeed, sometimes the women furthered gendered divisions of unpaid labour by devoting their time to the kind of work that might be seen by others (Shows & Gerstel 2009; Garey 1999) such as planning birthday parties, coordinating after school activities, and maintaining a clean house in order to meet standards of “good mothering” (Doucet 2006).

Whereas women’s dedication to these kinds of tasks might raise the “thorny feminist question of what women want” (McKay & Doucet 2010: 316) I believe the question is, more aptly ‘what are women (and men) pressured to want?’ Even with women’s widespread entrance into the workforce and the blurring of the public/private divide over the last fifty years, childcare remains a bastion of inequality: though more men are doing it than ever before, women too are devoting more time to their children then they did fifty years ago (Bianchi, Milkie, Sayer & Robinson 2012; Milan, Keown & Urquijo 2016; Fisher et al. 2007). Yet men tend to be lauded for the same involvement that women are culturally compelled to do (McMahon 1995). Participants themselves noticed this, and while a few lamented the low expectations placed on fathers, they were more likely to take this for granted or even embrace it. One father described how he “felt like a champ” while on leave while also acknowledging this as “fraudulent.” Though he was aware of double standard that advantaged him, it was just too alluring: “It's like I'm so good right now. This is the best I've ever been… [Women] weren't getting a pat on the back. I was aware of
it all, but I was embracing this fraudulence, I was like [local politician]. I was like, pat me on the back. And I'm doing nothing.” The significance here is not only that men have the luxury of choosing the extent of their involvement because they are not the ones held accountable (Beagan et al 2008: 667, McMahon 1995; Erickson 2005), but that because participation in domestic work remains largely discretionary, men are praised for choosing to be hands-on (Solomon 2014).

Whereas “good fathers” are increasingly those that are highly involved in family life (Williams 2008; Knijn 1995), that this kind of participation could be considered optional for mothers is unimaginable. McMahon (1995) argues that for a woman to risk seeing herself or being seen as irresponsible towards her children would call into question her whole character (234). Even when women are part of dual-income families, because their employment is more likely to be temporary, poorly paid, and unskilled, it tends to be viewed as means for providing for family and not a core feature of their identities (Legerski & Cornwall 2010; Johnson 2002). With mothering anchoring women’s sense of moral self (McMahon 1995; Mauthner 2002), the constraints imposed by cultural ideals of maternal caregiving do not disappear for breadwinning women; indeed mothers employed full-time were the most likely to be distressed about their inability to perform certain kinds of care work (Legerski and Cornwall 2010: 463; Medved 2009).

Excusing men from the pressure to do caregiving ‘the right way,’ means not only that women’s worries and guilt about not being proper mothers are not lessened, but that men’s caring is often placed on a pedestal. Although fathers’ greater involvement might ease some of the physical load mothers continue to disproportionately handle, it does little to challenge breadwinner power in that moment. Indeed, it supports the paradox identified by Shows and Gerstel (2009: 182). They argue that although fathering in public gives men visibility, garnishes praise from community members, and even contributes to changing gender norms, it can paradoxically sustain gender inequality within families – if not accompanied by involvement in daily caregiving. Shows and Gerstel (2009) argue that the structure of physicians’ family life, for instance, in which they attend public events, but are allowed to spend long hours on the job because of their wives’ ideological attachment to the man’s career or the comforts gained from the lifestyle it allows, were key to reproducing gender. I suggest that discourses of “new fatherhood” can similarly render wives unlikely to make demands on their involved husbands’ time. When a man’s domestic participation is framed as rare or going beyond the typical behaviour of other fathers, it becomes something for a spouse to feel grateful for (Hochschild 1989: 54). Thus even as the
men in this study were heavily involved in daily caregiving, they were often excused from equal participation in other aspects of domestic work and responsibility. Spousal interactions seemed to be shaped by the appreciation that their husbands were those who were walking the talk of involved fatherhood, and the women did or could not expect much beyond that. Although it is important to champion men’s involvement in caring and other domestic work, applying a feminist lens ensures that we remain conscious of not privileging male caregiving. That is, we must neither dismiss the doggedness of cultural expectations and structural constrains on women, nor overlook the latitude given to men.

5.4 Theoretical Contribution

To conclude this discussion, I would like to suggest a model for change that is both interactional and contextual. Based on the emphasis the men in this study and their wives placed on fathers’ leave-taking, I feel strongly that the depth of involvement and emotional experience of parenting in the early weeks and months of baby’s life were important to the men personally, the relational context in which it occurred, and larger society. Although it is important to consider politically-motivated change in the household (Sullivan 2004) that is not the only manifestation it can take. Examining the relationship between social context, subjectivity, and practice can reveal the more happenstance variations in couples’ arrangements that can have implications for social change. Indeed, because it is not possible to specify what kind of opposition, or quantify how much resistance, to the conventional gender order is necessary to tip the scales of change, those interested in the processes of “undoing gender” would be better served by adopting a more diffuse conception in which interactions are recognized as simultaneously constituted and constitutive. I therefore propose that change be viewed as a continuum, moving from local and emergent on the one end to the intentional and broad on the other.

On the more limited side are the individual changes in behaviour resulting from contextual push factors. In my research, for instance, widely-held cultural expectations and individual occupational resources interacted in complex ways to lead couples down, but also steer them away from, the gendered paths of least resistance. Taking parental leave compelled the men to do more domestic work than they would have otherwise, especially if they were unable to rely on a spouse to manage their time with baby. As one father put it, “When you are changing newborn diapers every hour or two you get better at it and you figure out very quickly what’s going on.”
For some men, the opportunity to practice their involvement led to taking on more childcare and housework after the leave ended. But even if mothers maintained their position as primary parent, just knowing the men could step in if needed helped relieve some of the burden that has typically fallen on women’s shoulders. At a minimum, the increased visibility of men taking on caregiving can inspire others and contribute to changing cultural definitions of “good fathering.” Thus even modest redistributions at the level of individual practice can still lead to greater equality in families.

Like Sullivan’s (2004) excerpt problematizing pragmatic redistributions of domestic work quoted at the beginning of this chapter, I too, however, purport a distinction between doing and thinking or feeling. The men in my study whose saw themselves as their wife’s helpers never developed the personal stake and emotional investment in parenting that led those who took ownership over caregiving to prioritize their relationship with their children and incorporate caring into their identities. And the more moved fathers feel, the more likely they are to take their new appreciation of parenting and children back out to the world of work and beyond by praising leave-taking and calling for better work-family balance. This process, however, is not necessarily motivated by a feminist concern for equality, or “gender consciousness” (Gerson & Peiss 1985). Rather fathers in this study developed what should more accurately be called a ‘caring consciousness’ – a way of thinking that emerges when men come to be practiced in, and feel accountable for, their parenting that can act as a catalyst for some level of reflection on and renegotiation of caring roles and responsibilities (see Philip 2014: 231). This transformative potential of caregiving – especially when it occurs without the mediation of a child’s mother – sets it apart from other aspects of domestic work, and must be acknowledged as an important alternative to “gender consciousness” in stimulating change (Gerson & Peiss 1985). Indeed, the uncommonness of feminist approaches to parenting in this study suggests that it important to recognize other cognitive commitments that inspire, versus circumstances that require, men’s routine involvement in the domestic sphere as a middle ground in changing family roles.

There is a fine line between singing the praises of men’s involvement and privileging fathers’ prerogative that theorists must carefully walk however. The tendency to celebrate fathers whose parenting deviates from breadwinner models of the past can also excuse them doing their share of the less desirable tasks, or more accurately, allow them the leeway to continue feeling unobligated to, and accountable for, domestic work that they may find less personally
meaningful. Thus, because men’s involvement in family life can unintentionally constrain women and contribute to the reproduction of gender inequality, I locate the kind of change undertaken with a feminist eye discussed by Sullivan (2004) at the broad end of the spectrum. Although participants in this study tended not to be mindful of women’s rights in general, some were concerned about being fair to their partners. It was the doing of childcare and other household work while on parental leave that could lead to this awareness and sense of obligation – once fathers had themselves been thrown in at the deep end it became harder for some to in good conscience eschew the work of reproducing family life. Whereas circumstances might push couples into more equal distributions of domestic work and responsibility, when men are committed, not only to their children, but to fairness, change is likely to have both greater reach and staying power.

5.5 Future Directions

Although unconventional distributions of housework work accompanied by a concern for equality may be best practice when it comes to changing the institution of family, interactions can be transformative without being politically-minded, even if more limited in scope. Recognizing change as a continuum acknowledges the extent to which we are all held accountable to cultural standards of masculinity and femininity, but also the unintentional, subtle, practical, deliberate, transgressive or radical ways that people can and do shape gender relations on a daily basis. Although the institution of fatherhood may not have yet undergone a drastic transformation, my research shows that some men and women are willing or are compelled to negotiate the bumpy terrain of changing norms and practices. Future research would benefit from further examination of the contexts which make this possible.

Although unintentional, my dissertation largely became a study of middle-class couples at the transition to parenthood. Whereas this reflects the population qualifying for parental leave in Canada, it is important to consider how the intersection of structure and culture play out for couples with less resources – such as employer top-ups and eligibility for EI - at their disposal, or those in which men or women are more constrained by gendered jobs. Compare the parenting practices of physicians and EMTs, for instance, for instance, Shows and Gerstel (2009) argue that class or occupation shape the gendered relations and the domestic division of labor in the family, which in turn shape the ways men behave as fathers. Pairing this kind of analysis with an
ever changing parenting context makes it possible to identify other opportunities – such as policy initiatives, workplace efforts, and shifting cultural expectations – in which the kind of contextual, interactional processes detailed in this dissertation can be found. Longitudinal studies which could examine couples’ arrangements as children grow and families adapt to external forces would be especially fruitful. The more we learn about the dynamics of change, the more we can encourage gender equality – by promoting the conditions in which it can take root, or the policies which can provide the “gentle force” (Leira 2006: 39) necessary for a more widespread adjustment in practice. As I have argued in this conclusion, a gender consciousness cannot be the yardstick of change, but as feminists we can recognize that it is the accumulation of subversive interactions and shift towards more intentional resistance that will ultimately achieve the unsettling of gendered – not just differentiated – parenting over time.
References


Chronholm, A. 2004. “Dad on parental leave: Men's experience with shared parental leave.” Göteborg, University of Göteborg, Department of Sociology


Appendix A: Leave-Takers Profile

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Father’s Length of Leave</th>
<th>Father’s Motivation for Leave-Taking</th>
<th>Leave Circumstances</th>
<th>Wife Ineligible for EI leave</th>
<th>Wife Earning at Least 60% More</th>
<th>Men’s Top-Up</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Solo</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Government</td>
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<tr>
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### Appendix B: Household Portrait Activity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHO:</th>
<th>Makes dinner</th>
<th>Makes sure there is food in the fridge</th>
<th>Shovels snow</th>
<th>Pays the bills</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Before Baby</td>
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**Other/Notes**

**Notes:**

- Makes sure there is food in the fridge: Husband Only.
- Shovels snow: Mostly Wife, Husband Helps.
- Pays the bills: Mostly Husband, Wife Helps.

**Appendix B:**

**WHO:**

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<tr>
<th>Makes dinner</th>
<th>Makes sure there is food in the fridge</th>
<th>Shovels snow</th>
<th>Pays the bills</th>
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**Other/Notes**

- Makes sure there is food in the fridge: Husband Only.
- Shovels snow: Mostly Wife, Husband Helps.
- Pays the bills: Mostly Husband, Wife Helps.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Mostly Wife, Husband Helps</th>
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<th>Mostly Husband, Wife Helps</th>
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Copyright Acknowledgements

Chapter two of this dissertation was published as sole author manuscript entitled “Balancing the Scales: Negotiating Father’s Parental Leave Use” on November 9th 2017 in the Canadian Review of Sociology, Volume 54, Issue 4. Copyright is held by the 2017 Canadian Sociological Association/La Societe canadienne de sociologie and permission to reproduce it in this thesis has been granted by the publisher, John Wiley and Sons and Copyright Clearance Center.