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On: 21 October 2014, At: 23:22

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## Community, Work & Family

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ccwf20>

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Published online: 15 Oct 2014.

To cite this article: Gunhild R. Farstad (2014): Difference and equality: Icelandic parents' division of parental leave within the context of a childcare gap, *Community, Work & Family*, DOI: [10.1080/13668803.2014.965661](https://doi.org/10.1080/13668803.2014.965661)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13668803.2014.965661>

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## Difference and equality: Icelandic parents' division of parental leave within the context of a childcare gap

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(Received 18 November 2013; accepted 23 July 2014)

Iceland's parental leave system, granting mothers and fathers equal benefits, may be interpreted as part of the development in the Nordic countries towards a dual-earner/dual-caregiver model. Even though uptake studies show fathers' increased participation in childcare, the use of the entitlement varies and a gendered pattern persists. This paper is based on interviews with 14 Icelandic couples who find themselves in a situation where they have to bridge a care gap between parental leave and state-subsidized childcare. While mothers tend to stretch their part of the leave on the argument that six months is too short a leave, fathers generally find three months to be long enough. The discussion revolves around the question of the relationship between difference and equality, inspired by Andrea Doucet's (2006) concept of strategic essentialism. May we envision a policy system that takes into consideration the way people invest in gender and at the same time develop policy measures that facilitate gender equality?

**Keywords:** parental leave; equality; difference; care gap; Iceland

El Sistema de permiso parental de Islandia, que da beneficios iguales a madres y padres, puede ser interpretado como parte del desarrollo de los países nórdicos hacia un modelo de igual distribución de ingreso y responsabilidades en el cuidado de niños entre hombres y mujeres. Aunque estudios del uso del permiso parental muestran mayor participación de los padres en el cuidado de los niños, la utilización de estos derechos varía y persisten pautas de género. Este artículo está basado en entrevistas a 14 parejas islandesas que se encuentran en una situación en la cual se necesita cubrir la brecha entre el permiso parental y el cuidado de los niños subsidiado por el estado. Mientras las madres tienden a extender su parte del permiso parental con el argumento de que un permiso de seis meses es demasiado corto, los padres generalmente encuentran que tres meses es demasiado. La discusión gira alrededor de la relación entre diferencia e igualdad, inspirado en el concepto de esencialismo estratégico de Andrea Doucet (2006). Podemos imaginarnos un sistema de políticas que toma en cuenta las maneras en que la gente invierte en género y a la vez desarrollar medidas de políticas de bienestar que faciliten igualdad de género?

**Palabras claves:** permiso parental; igualdad; diferencia; vacío sistémico; Islandia

### Introduction

In 2000, Iceland issued a new act on parental leave (Act no. 95/2000) that received a lot of attention both within and outside the Nordic region.<sup>1</sup> By this act, the parental leave

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was extended from six to nine months, granting both parents three months of non-transferable parental leave, plus three months of leave that they can divide as they choose. The Icelandic parental leave model<sup>2</sup> has been presented as an example of a gender equality-oriented model due to the extent and nature of the encouragement given to the fathers' use of parental leave and involvement in childcare more generally (Lister, 2009, p. 254). The Icelandic parental leave policy adds to the picture presented of the Nordic welfare states, offering a policy package aimed at fulfilling a dual-earner/dual-caregiver vision. This is a vision of a society in which men and women engage symmetrically in employment and caregiving, and where gender equality, paid work and caregiving are all valued (Gornick & Meyers, 2009).

The issue of gender equality has become one of the main determinants for the success of the Icelandic parental leave scheme, and Iceland has been lauded for taking a progressive step towards de-gendering parenthood. Still the division of parental leave taken by Icelandic parents reflects gendered differences. Compared to their Scandinavian counterparts, Icelandic men use a greater percentage of the total leave available to parents, although most of them use their earmarked portion and leave the dividable portion for their partners. This means that even though the entitlements to parental leave are equally available to both the parents, the use is not necessarily symmetric. Parental leave taken by Icelandic men surpassed the initial estimates and continued to grow in the years following the act (Eydal & Gíslason, 2008). Research has also showed that the introduction of earmarked parental leave for fathers correlates with the increased sharing of childcare tasks in the families (Arnalds, Eydal, & Gíslason, 2013). This tendency may naturally be understood as a strong public support of the system and its aims. Uptake, however, does not tell the whole story of the division of leave, nor does it necessarily reflect the type of care arrangements parents regard as desirable or feasible.

Iceland has so far the shortest parental leave within the Nordic countries,<sup>3</sup> and despite the relatively good provision of public day care services, these services are usually not available when parents finish their parental leave. This situation underscores the need to understand and discuss how policy measures interact and the way they generate a *structure of opportunity* that shapes parents' practices (Ellingsæter, 2006). The lack of accordance in family welfare benefits creates what has been termed a *childcare gap* (Ellingsæter, 2006), which is faced by many Icelandic parents whose offspring are in the early childhood phase (Eydal, 2008, p. 142). Gíslason (2008, p. 94) identifies this gap as the main flaw in the Icelandic childcare scheme because it is mothers who adjust their labour market participation to bridge it. The Icelandic care gap is the backdrop of the analysis in this paper where I look into the way parents divide the parental leave between themselves.

Inspired by Doucet's (2006) term *strategic essentialism*, I will question the relationship between gender difference and gender equality. How may we address the question of gender difference within the framework of a policy aiming at gender equality? Is gender difference necessarily in opposition to gender equality, and if not, how may this insight be taken into account when policy on parental leave is shaped? Several attempts have been made to find ways to reframe the opposition of difference and equality when looking for ways to achieve greater gender equality. Within feminist thinking, a dilemma, often referred to as Wollstonecraft's dilemma, arises when choice has to be made between demanding rights of equality based on either women's likeness to men or by revaluing their differences in attributes, capacities and activities (Dahlerup, 2003). Fraser (1994) contributes to this discussion by systematically evaluating the two strategies: making

women's life patterns more like men's (universal breadwinner model) or granting compensations for women's traditional activity (caregiver parity model). Her conclusion, however, is that instead of aiming at one of these two strategies, men should become more like women: people who do primary care work. To draw nearer a vision of gender equity, according to Fraser, we need to end gender as we know it (p. 612). One way of doing this is to make men's life patterns more similar to women's; both women and men need to partake in both breadwinning and caregiving. (p. 611). This type of dual-earner/dual-caregiver model is imbedded in the Nordic parental leave scheme; however, in a country that has gone far politically in order to achieve this model, gender difference is still part of the pattern I find when analyzing ways men and women enter into care work. I wish to discuss the way these differences may be understood and the consequences they entail in terms of policy structures.

The analysis is based on interviews with 14 Icelandic couples – all parents of young children, during or immediately after using their parental leave benefits. My aim is to explore the relationship between a policy facilitating symmetrical parenthood and the parents' strategies when dividing the parental leave while at the same time facing a care gap after the available parental leave period. What do the parents' gendered conceptions of time for care mean when they decide on dividing the parental leave between them? In the analysis, I apply Tobio and Trifiletti's (2005) term *packaging strategies*, i.e. the ways parents put together private and public resources as they organize the care for their children. Through my analysis, I identified not only a gendered pattern at the core of these strategies but also differences within gender, and I especially found differences in terms of the ways fathers' care enter into childcare practices during parental leave.

I begin by briefly describing the benefits available to Icelandic parents with young children and then go on to explain the aims of the Parental Leave Act and offer some statistical findings regarding its use.

#### **Childcare policy in Iceland<sup>4</sup>**

The Icelandic parental leave is an individual benefit, and each parent earns the entitlement based fully on his or her own work activities in the six months prior to the leave. Leave pay compensates for 80% of their wages up to a certain ceiling. The parents may stay at home together if they like as there are no regulations about work activity for one parent while the other is on leave. It is also possible for parents to combine the leave with work and to stretch the leave over a longer time period, in which case leave pay is reduced accordingly. The leave, however, must be used before the child turns three.

At some point after parental leave, most Icelandic children attend a day care centre called 'leikskóli', which literally translates into 'playschool'. Since the 1990s, there has been a steady increase in public day care provision in Iceland, placing the country amongst those with the highest coverage rates for three- and four-year-olds (Eydal & Ólafsson, 2008). However, in the capital area<sup>5</sup> most children are 18-months-old before they get admitted, leaving a gap of about nine months between parental leave and available day care.

The notion of a care gap must be seen in light of the high female employment rate in Iceland, as well as commonly agreed upon ideals of good childcare. As I will return to in my analysis, most parents needed to make compromises and the considerations they made would in most cases affect the way the parental leave was divided and organized.

The care option for children below two years of age is often family day care, usually childminders (*dagforeldrar/dagmamma*<sup>6</sup>) who look after up to five children in their private homes. Although these childminders are registered and subsidized by the municipality, they are not required to meet the same pedagogical standards as staff who work in playschools.

In 2009, 12 of Iceland's 77 municipalities offered parents a care allowance if they did not use other subsidized options such as playschool or family day care. Participants in this study resided in municipalities where parents received a monthly flat amount starting when the parental leave is over and continuing until the child turned two or started attending subsidized day care. According to a report from the Centre of Children and Family Research at the University of Iceland, it is usually the mother who receives this benefit while caring for the child at home (RBF, 2010).

### **The Icelandic Parental Leave Act**

Granting paid parental leave for fathers is part of the process whereby childcare is increasingly 'going public', meaning that the state is given a say in the distribution of economic resources and caring responsibilities within the family (Anttonen, Johansson, & Leira, 2007, p. 115). With the passage of Act no. 95/2000, leave-taking in Iceland was made into an individual entitlement available to all parents regardless of gender.

The act's purpose is set out as follows:

The aim of this Act is to ensure a child's access to both her/his parents. Furthermore, the aim of this Act is to enable both women and men to reconcile work and family life. (Act no. 95/2000, art.2)

By articulating these aims, the Icelandic Government identified the dual approach that would underlie care policies aimed at resolving the gendered division of work and childcare: respecting the right of children to receive care from both the parents and increasing equality between men and women (Eydal & Gíslason, 2008, p. 30). The bill preceding the act argued that the traditional division of labour between mothers and fathers often resulted in fathers being deprived of opportunities to spend time with their children. Thus, specified leave for each parent would also secure fathers' *right* to a leave, making it feasible for them to care for their child when it is an infant (Einarsdóttir & Pétursdóttir, 2009, p. 169). The thought was that by dividing parental leave rights more equally, it would be possible to achieve greater gender equality in work life, as women would return to paid work sooner after giving birth and leave more of the responsibility for childcare to their partners.

Eydal (2008) made a comparison of fathers' and mothers' use of parental leave before and after the 2000 legislation (1997 and 2003) and found, not surprisingly, that fathers' uptake grew considerably. Statistics from the Icelandic parental leave fund (*Fæðingarorlofsjóður*) show that 47% of the applicants for a parental leave benefit in 2009 were men. The average number of leave days taken by men in 2009 was 94, while women averaged 177 leave days. One interesting finding was that, under the new act, it became more usual for mothers to take the leave on a part-time basis, indicating that they stretch the leave and had the compensation reduced accordingly over a longer period.

Eydal's study showed that while the number of fathers at work in the first months following the birth of a child decreased, the number of mothers at work during this same

period remained stable. These findings suggest that although the time fathers spend at home during the infancy phase has increased, changes to the parental leave system have had less impact on women's work life. A later study found, as well, that the closing of the gender pay gap has stagnated since 2003, (Gíslason, 2010, p. 19) despite the levelling of household and caring tasks in Icelandic families. Gíslason suggests, among other reasons for this, that the changes in the division of work in the home are more statistical than real. In other words, even though men take a greater role in household tasks, they are still apt to adjust these tasks to their work life. In this way, fathers tend to do more of the work that can be done 'when it is convenient' (Gíslason, 2010).

### Theoretical perspective

I develop my analysis in line with Orloff (2008, 2009) and Doucet (2006), both of whom are contributors to the discussion on the relationship between gender equality and gender difference and also in the discussion on the division of work and care. Orloff (2009) argues that the vision of gender symmetry in combining work and childcare is too far from people's real-life experiences and 'takes too lightly the deep investments people have in gender, and the ways in which knowledge, subjectivity and agency are both constrained and enabled by existing gendered categories' (Orloff, 2008, p. 11). According to Bjørnholt (2013), arguments about difference between men and women have become delegitimized, and deemed 'essentialist' over the last few decades, and sameness has become the hegemonic perspective. Rather than taking a stance for or against the two perspectives, my aim is to consider the interrelationship of gender difference and gender equality using the division of parental leave between parents as my empirical case.

Doucet's claim is that the concepts of gender equality and gender difference are highly interdependent and that any adequate analysis must take account of the complex interplay between them. Furthermore, she argues that policies and programs directed at fathers should take into account the intertwined social and embodied differences between fathers and mothers in the early phase of childrearing rather than assume that parents are disembodied and completely interchangeable (Doucet, 2009, p. 92). In her study of fathers as primary caregivers, she points out that assuming equality or even shared caregiving can imply overlooking important differences in men's and women's social worlds and the gendered norms of parenting. Such assumptions may fail to recognize 'how embodiment can, in certain sites and at certain times, matter greatly' (Doucet, 2006, p. 104).

At the core of Doucet's approach is the willingness to promote sensitivity to gender differences without diminishing the value of having fathers contribute more equally in childcare. She calls for a contextual or *strategic essential* approach, i.e. an approach that recognizes the importance of being mindful of gender differences in certain contexts while at the same time guarding against absolutist categorizations of difference (Doucet, 2006, p. 28). Doucet's approach is useful to me as I consider parents' perceptions of gender appropriate caregiving in the infant stage of childhood.

### Data and method

The data material that forms the basis of this study consists of qualitative interviews with 14 Icelandic couples. I conducted the interviews in 2009 and 2010, and the participants were contacted through the researcher's private and professional networks. I also used the

'snowball method' to recruit new participants, i.e. interviewed parents were asked if they knew of other couples who might be interested in participating. I distributed information letters explaining the project, data storage and privacy standards to all participants.

The participants<sup>7</sup> were cohabiting, heterosexual couples with a child under the age of two years. All families except one resided in Reykjavik or a municipality in the capital area. I selected the participants in order to ensure socio-economic variation with regard to education level and employment position. Still, a small majority had earned university degrees and were employed accordingly. Some of the participants were students.

I conducted thematic interviews focusing on the way the parental leave had been organized, the plans for the care of the child and the combination of work and childcare in the time to come. The parents were asked to explain the reasons for their arrangements, to reflect on possible alternative solutions and to talk about their views on the childcare benefits granted to them. In most families, the interview was conducted after the parents had finished their leave. Therefore, they were asked to reflect back on the reasons for organizing the leave, a fact that may lead the respondents to retrospectively justify their choices. Still in all the families the leave was not far back in time, and I found benefits in interviewing the parents together as they discussed the decisions among themselves and, thus, gave me insight into the various considerations they made. (See Bjørnholt & Farstad, 2012 for a broader discussion on joint couple interviews.) Each interview usually lasted for about 90 minutes and took place in the family's home. In all cases, both parents were present, and sometimes the children as well. The language spoken in most of the interviews was English; in a couple of cases, we spoke Danish and Norwegian. The interviews were recorded digitally and transcribed verbatim.

The study took place in the wake of the financial recession that hit Iceland in 2008. The recession had repercussions on the parents' daily lives, although to various degrees. It proved to be an interesting time to study parents' decision-making processes, as several of them needed to alter their original plans. As is evident from some of the examples, the recession is part of the context within which the participants were manoeuvring.

Obviously, these 14 couples do not constitute a representative sample of Icelandic parents with young children. However, the information gathered through the interviews provides valuable insight into the decision-making processes in families with small children within the context of Iceland's parental leave system and childcare policy structure. Furthermore, the interviews elicit information about many of the relationships parents enter into in their daily lives: in the family, in the workplace and in their social lives. The benefit of long qualitative interviews is the opportunity to gain insight into the way meaning is produced and the factors parents take into consideration when deciding on how to organize and divide parental leave.

### *Analyzing the material*

I read the transcribed interviews, looking for descriptions of the *packaging strategies* (Tobío & Trifiletti, 2005) parents apply when they organize their time for childcare during and after parental leave, and the way the strategies were connected to the perceived needs of the child in this early phase of childhood. This way I directed my attention towards how parents had organized the parental leave period and continued to focus on the meanings and processes behind these decisions. Several studies have shown that the factors parents take into account when arranging care for their child are based on a mix of economic and emotional, or moral, criteria (see Duncan, Edwards, Reynolds, & Allred,

2004; Holloway, 1998; Vincent & Ball, 2006). Bearing this in mind, I directed my attention towards the way parents gave reasons for their arrangements, when developing an overview of the different strategies.

### **The context of a care gap**

Female work participation in Iceland is high and for women to enter into a full-time housewife role is rare. Female part-time work is also less common compared to the Scandinavian countries (Nordic Statistical Yearbook, 2012). Thus, the assessment of childcare options is for many a question of how to get the state-subsidized entitlements to fit together in order for the parents to be working, and the child to be cared for in a way that the parents find appropriate. With nine months of parental leave available and the prospect of not finding an opening in a playschool before the child turns 18 months, all parents in the sample needed to find strategies to close the care gap. This was seen as a troublesome period by many of the interviewed parents because it implied taking into consideration the child's best interest, the parents' well-being as well as the family's financial situation. Unlike their Scandinavian neighbours, Icelanders have been described as less reliant on the state to provide childcare and used to finding private solutions (Ólafson, 2003). Still in the interviews, most parents felt the parental leave was too short, leaving them in a precarious situation when trying to find the best solutions for the time ahead.

Using a childminder was generally presented as an emergency solution unless the parents knew of a childminder they trusted or one who was highly recommended. Many shared the opinion of Sólrún, one of the interviewed mothers:

I find it hard to put a one year old into the arms of someone, like we had to do this time with her ... into the hands of someone I don't really know. And I found that, and find it, very hard.

Even though parents in many cases expressed satisfaction with their particular childminder, the system itself was not necessarily appreciated. The parents expressed confidence in playschools, emphasizing the security they provide for the children and linking this trust to the greater number of staff on site as compared to childminders, who usually work alone. However, even if playschool had been available right after nine months of parental leave, most parents would not have their child start playschool at that age. Opinions regarding a suitable age for children to enter playschool differed somewhat, but a common view was that the child should be at least one-year-old. The care allowance was rarely brought up by the parents. The monthly amount is relatively low and usually does not compensate for the loss of a regular income. This probably explains why they did not see the benefit as a relevant part of their packaging strategy.

The fathers' leave was mentioned several times as a benefit for mothers returning to work. The mothers felt that this was reassuring as the alternative of using childminders, or even relatives, was as a less optimal solution for the children. This was the case for Brynja, who was happy that her husband wanted to take three months of leave when she went back to work.

Yes, (it's) so comfortable, the idea of being able to start working without sending her [the daughter] to the babysitter or day care.



An important element in these parents' decisions on leave-taking was the widely held perception that the mother's leave was beneficial for the whole family. In families with several children, life is often hectic, and the leave was considered to be a period where parents could spend time with all their children. The father's leave could also be described as a bonus for the family as a whole. It was for instance deemed to benefit older children who needed some extra attention around the birth of a sibling.

So far, I have presented the parents' views on the care gap and the challenges in this phase. When I continue, I will look closer at the ways parents fill this gap, and how the choices they make results in a gendered pattern.

### **Parental leave filling the gap**

Looking into the care packages put together by the parents, two typical patterns appeared; in about half of the families, the fathers used a week or two of his leave around the birth, and the rest after the mother had finished her leave. These types of care packages took the shape of a *tidy trajectory of care* (Stefansen & Farstad, 2010). In the other families, the father used his leave at the same time as the mother used hers, either in one continuous period or in portions over time. These packages were less tidy and appeared to be put together in a more ad hoc fashion, often drawing on relatives to help bridge the gap between the leave and available day care. The pattern that appears is one where all of the mothers take six months of leave, stretching it in variable degrees; some added a couple of months, some spread it over a full year. As we will see, the fathers' strategies differ over a broader scale depending on whether they take their leave in a continuous period after the mother have finished hers, or not. In the same way, as we found in Stefansen and Farstad (2010), these strategies did reveal a class pattern. The families who opted for a tidy trajectory were usually middle-class families, where the parents had earned long academic educations. However, all the fathers use their three months earmarked parental leave and did not stretch their leave over a longer period. Within a policy regime facilitating symmetrical parenthood, one may ask why we find this gendered pattern. Part of the answer may be found when I look into the parents' perceptions on how to arrange the parental leave and how mothers and fathers, respectively, perceive spending time on care.

### ***Mothers: 'six months is too short'***

The reason mothers gave for adopting the strategy of stretching the leave was that they felt six months was too short. Their decisions to stretch the leave reflected the way they viewed their child's needs as well as their own needs and wishes during the months after the child's birth, as this quote from Maria illustrates:

I mean obviously six months is very short, and I think ... I was always intent on trying to have the kids at home for a longer period. But at the same time, you know, maybe not ready to go to work myself.

Anna, who spread her leave over 12 months, explained her decision in this way:

It's just that I had felt that I wanted to stay home. I wanted the child to stay home for a longer time. They shouldn't come to day care until they are at least one. (...) And I thought it was difficult to go to work earlier.

The mothers saw sharing the dividable three months with the father as a less viable option. Several of the couples mentioned breastfeeding as the main reason for mothers needing a longer leave. Örn put it this way:

I think we, kind of from the beginning ... it was so [normal] for us that you (the wife) would take the first six while he (the son) was dependent, being breastfed and being much more dependent on you.

In the interview, Örn and his wife explained that they saw this division as the most common arrangement and never really discussed how to divide the leave. This was also the case for Brynja and her husband. Brynja spread the six months of leave over eight months, and her husband stayed at home for three months. Brynja explained the division, saying:

It just came normally, or naturally, probably because of the breastfeeding. And when she is ... you know, young or newborn ... I think she would need me more than the father.

Although none of the women considered staying at home for more than one year, they saw the opportunity to prolong the leave as both a benefit and a privilege. However, stretching the leave meant downsizing the income, and for some of the couples, this was not financially workable. Unnur wanted 12 months of leave but found it impossible for financial reasons. She hopes to be able to take a longer leave with her next child.

I want to take one year next time. I don't know how I'm going to do it, but I was not ready to go to work when he was 10 months.

As is clear from these examples, the mothers' wish for a longer leave coincides with the perceived needs of children to stay at home beyond the available parental leave period. Thus, it is mainly the mothers who adjust their time to bridge the childcare gap. They determined this arrangement to be a solution that was beneficial both for themselves and for their children, despite the reduced income. The mothers did not seriously consider the option of dividing the leave into portions and combining it with work. They all wanted one continuous leave period after the birth of their child, although the length of this period differed and was combined with the father's leave in different ways.

### ***Fathers: 'three months is long enough'***

Contrary to the mothers, the fathers regarded their earmarked three months as a sufficiently long parental leave. However, in the interviews a differentiated pattern between the fathers became visible. While some of the fathers emphasized spending time with the child after the mother had finished her leave, others opted for the possibility of spending time together with their partners while on leave.

For Örn, it was important to establish an independent relationship with his son, and that was why he wanted to use his leave in one continuous period after his wife returned to work.

I just think it ... it creates a closer bond between the father and the child to be alone and get the mother out of the equation.

His plan was to use vacation time following his leave and then stay at home with his son until they found a childminder. He counted himself lucky to be able to do it that way also because it meant that his son was older before he started day care.

Still, he saw three months leave as long enough and was happy to start working again.

Well, I thought three months was fine. I mean, I was getting quite restless towards the end so it was ... I mean ... more than three months would have been [too much].

Another father in the sample, Gunnar, took three months of leave while his wife was still at home. This was not his original plan, and Gunnar was disappointed that he did not get more time alone with their daughter. He wanted to be more involved in her development throughout infancy.

I could feel it ever since she was born that, I mean that, just if you meet her more one day than the other, you feel the difference over just one day. (...) ...and when you are on maternity leave or paternity leave, you are with them every day, you learn to read them much better I think.

In families where fathers used their leave in a continuous period without the mother present, the fathers usually emphasized the benefit of the leave in terms of strengthening their relationship with their child. Örn and Gunnar in the examples above emphasized early fatherhood involvement, independent of the mother, whereas other fathers were more likely to consider themselves as a supplement to their partners in the first phase of childhood. Magnús is one of the fathers who to a lesser extent emphasized the importance of being present in the early phase of childhood. Due to the uncertainty in the employment market, Magnús and his wife changed their original leave plans, a change that resulted in postponing Magnús' leave. As it turned out, Magnús thought this was a good arrangement because, as he saw it, the child would have been more reliant on his mother when he was younger.

Well, for one thing it's much easier to play with a one-and-a-half-year-old than a nine-month-old, and I think probably, you know, it's better quality time, you know. Because he is a little bit more mature and ... you know, I think it's better for us as bonding.

Two of the fathers in the sample had initially no intention of using their part of the leave, but circumstances led them to change their plans. One of these fathers, Ívar, was seeing his business suffer hard from the financial recession and ended up taking a three-month leave while his wife was still at home. The fact that he was self-employed was initially one of the reasons he did not want to take any leave. Besides, he did not consider spending time alone with his infant son to be especially important.

But you know for me, personally, I don't really connect to my children for the first 12 months. (...) It might be that I was not ready or too busy doing something else, but, you know, after ... when they are two years old, you start to connect better with them. Maybe [that's] the difference between a man and a woman. I don't know.

Sveinn had not planned to take parental leave either. Until his son was born, he was working a schedule of two weeks on and two weeks off and assumed that he would have enough time to spend with his son in the weeks when he did not work. However, he lost

his job due to the financial recession and chose to use his leave instead of going on unemployment benefits. He got a new job and started working after he finished his leave. Sveinn talks about his situation as a blessing in disguise because he was able to spend more time with his son and his wife. In addition to appreciating the opportunity to spend time with his son, Sveinn also valued the opportunity to help his wife in the postnatal period.

For these two fathers the decision to take a leave was spurred by external circumstances, mainly their respective work situations. Neither intended to use the leave; still, they both saw it as a nice opportunity to spend time with their wife and child for a period of time. The prolonging of the leave was taken care of by the mothers, and these fathers viewed their participation in the care of their infants during this period as a bonus and an especially nice time for the family to have together.

Furthermore, work featured prominently in the fathers' stories about leave-taking, and circumstances in their work life often determined their leave arrangement. One example is Jakob, who took one month of his leave immediately after the birth of his son and then two weeks in a period when his wife had to work. The remaining six weeks he spread over a period of two months, combining leave time with work. When he was at work, his wife worked from home or made use of her flexible work hours. Under this arrangement, Jakob's employer did not need to hire a replacement.

I just thought it was best for us, and for me, and for my company. So it's easiest for all parties.

### ***Summing up***

The cases presented above show that a range of objectives are involved when parents organize the parental leave. One objective is to prolong the leave to the benefit of the mother and child. Rather than focusing on the benefits for each parent, several of the couples were eager to discuss the advantages for the child(ren) in terms of care arrangements and family consolidation. With regard to the division of care between the parents, care time appeared to be circumscribed differentially. The mothers' care time was linked to a need for rehabilitation after the birth and breastfeeding; the fathers' time was linked to a broader set of issues. Some couples emphasized the need for the father to bond with the child in the early childhood phase, while others regarded fathers' time on leave either as help for the mother during the infant phase or as caregiving for older children. Although the use was different, the common perception was that fathers did not require as much leave time as mothers. It was also evident that fathers' leaves were, to a greater extent than mothers' leaves, influenced by contextual factors like changes in their work situation. In this regard, fathering can be regarded as a much more ad hoc and flexible practice than mothering (see Braun, Vincent, & Ball, 2010; Gíslason, 2008, p. 93).

The possibility of fathers using some of the discretionary time or taking leave without pay was for the most part discussed only hypothetically. Stretching the mother's leave can put a strain on the family income, and a solution might be a strategy whereby fathers work more. This also puts the mothers in a more dependent situation financially. The perceived scarcity of leave available to mothers most likely restricts fathers' ability to use more of the dividable leave time. Some fathers considered taking no leave or dividing it up and combining it with work. These solutions were rarely mentioned in conjunction with the mother's part of the leave. A conceivable interpretation of this

gender-differentiated pattern is that men are still linked more closely to their work life than women are.

What I have found is that a gender-differentiated pattern exists within a policy structure aiming at gender symmetry. The mothers in my study argue for the need to have a longer leave than is available to them with 80% income replacement. The fathers' time is linked closer to their work, also in the period when they need to bridge a care gap. Although I find these differences, there is also reason to mention change as part of the picture. I do not find the traditional male provider who avoids care or other household tasks. Neither do I find the traditional female caregiver opting out of employed work when becoming a mother. Thus, I am not arguing we should look at the gender-differentiated pattern in a deficit perspective. Traditional gender patterns are not merely continued, rather I find that gender-differentiated patterns are re-made in new ways: most Icelandic men take their leave when they become fathers, however not in the same way, or to the same extent as their female partners.

It is hard to pinpoint the reasons for the gender-differentiated pattern I found, using the data available. As Doucet (2009) argues, to understand what moves fathers to feel and be responsible for domestic life requires attention to 'issues of identity, commitment, embodiment, deeply rooted socialization or habitus and normative community assumptions around gender, breadwinning and caring' (Doucet, 2009, p. 79). This is, of course, also relevant concerning women. As McMahon (1995) argues, '[A] woman makes decisions about motherhood on the basis of her conception of who she is, rather than in terms of conformity to social roles' (p. 21). Rather than delving deeper into these questions, I want to focus on the relationship between gender equality measures and the observed gender-differentiated division of parental leave in the following discussion.

### ***Discussion: difference and equality***

In the Nordic welfare model, the infant phase of a child's life has been made an object for policy measures aimed at levelling the disadvantages and benefits connected to childrearing for mothers and fathers. The Icelandic situation presents an interesting case study because the country's parental leave policy has moved towards individualizing and de-gendering the basis on which to claim entitlements. At the same time, Icelandic parents experience a care gap that needs to be bridged before children start day care.

Gornick and Meyers (2009) argue that the Scandinavian countries are drawing near a vision of a dual-earner/dual-caregiver welfare state model. These are countries where paid family leave, regulation of work time, early childhood education and care are priorities in politics. Gornick and Meyers' vision of a 'Real Life Utopia' entails a social and economic outcome in which 'men and women engage symmetrically in both paid work and in unpaid care giving; it is thus fundamentally gender-egalitarian' (p. 17). This visionary model thoroughly describes the beneficial effects that the equal division of breadwinning and caregiving has on society, and it emphasizes parental leave as one of the tools towards achieving such equality. In Orloff's (2009) view, Gornick and Meyers assume that men and women do not have opposed gender interests and that employers and 'the state' are the challenging factors. This definition of the problem and its solution occlude both the body and women's attachment to caregiving, and it promotes an assumption of sameness with reference to men's and women's equivalence going into childrearing (Orloff, 2009, p. 139).

I have showed that the strategies parents apply when dividing the leave is in line with their gendered perceptions of time spent with (young) children. While mothers' leave is regarded as more or less fixed and time consuming due to its embodied nature, fathers' care time is more variable and affected by contextual factors. My findings show that despite going relatively far in giving families incentives to divide care more equally, gender is not 'ended' as Fraser (1994) puts it, but what we are seeing is perhaps some new differences. Men's life patterns have moved away from a male-provider model, and taking part in the care of infants has become the norm in Iceland, as in several other countries. However, differences between women and men are still present, implying that men and women's life patterns have changed, but not necessarily in a way that creates sameness.

Studies of Icelandic fathers' uptake of parental leave show that the great majority of men use their earmarked three months, and compared with the situation before the 2000, when the current Parental Leave Act came into effect, fathers partake in early childhood care to a larger extent (Arnalds et al., 2013; Eydal, 2008). Still, these changes do not seem to alter the time mothers spend on infant care over the course of the parental leave period. It may be that the changes in the Icelandic parental leave scheme have had more impact on the time fathers spend at home caring for their children than on the time mothers spend at working outside the home. This development signals that time spent on care cannot be regarded as a zero-sum game, or as a constant unit, a point also made by studies in other Nordic countries (e.g. Cools, Fiva, & Kirkebøen, 2010; Duvander, 2006, p. 21).

So how do we relate to the continued, yet changing differences in light of Wollstonecraft's dilemma presented in the introduction? Drawing on her study of Canadian fathers who defined themselves as primary caregivers, Doucet found that in the early phase of parenthood, the biological and social differences between women and men appear to be magnified. She argues, however, that entering differently into childcare does not automatically signify inequality. Rather, the questions one must ask are: at what time and in what context do gender differences *make a difference*, and to what extent do differences relate to disadvantages? (Doucet, 2006, p. 27). Applying Doucet's (2006) concept of *strategic essentialism* opens up the possibility of taking into account the gender differences in a specific context while avoiding an absolutist categorization of difference. If we apply this type of contextual approach, it allows us to consider the possibility of including *both* difference *and* equality in the development of childcare policy. Considering this particular policy field, we might look for possibilities of taking into account the gender-differentiated, embodied experiences of parenthood in the early childhood phase without abandoning goals of gender equality in the family.

### Concluding remarks

Although Iceland has enacted a de-gendered parental leave scheme, a gender-differentiated pattern exists with regard to the way parents divide and perceive their contributions to infant care. Within this pattern, I found a degree of variation among parents' ways of strategically arranging the care in order to bridge the care gap they face after the parental leave period. This finding calls for a perspective on difference and equality where one does not necessarily exclude the other; rather they may be seen as intertwined. Closing the Icelandic childcare gap by providing a longer parental leave period and sufficient day care for the youngest children would facilitate a broader scope

Table 1. The participants in the study.

Family	Parental leave arrangement: M/F	Mother's sector/education	Father's sector/education	Age of children
1	3/6 t (in addition M took time off without pay)	Self employed Vocational study	Private sector BA/ vocational study	10 months, 2, 9 and 12 years
2	8/3 s	Private sector MA	Private sector MA	22 months, 4 and 10 years
3	8/3 s	Academic sector Ph.D.	Public sector MA	20 months
4	8, 5/3 t	Private sector MA	Self employed BA	16 months and 6 years
5	9/3 s	Private sector BA	Private sector BA	20 months
6	9/3 s	Private sector BA	Private sector Vocational study	16 months
7	9/3 t	Public sector Vocational study	Private sector BA/student	18 months, 8 and 12 years
8	9, 5/5 s	Private sector No formal education	Private sector No formal education	2, 8, 17 years
9	12/1 t	Self employed Vocational study	Private sector MA	13 months and 3 years
10	10/3 s	Academic sector MA	Academic sector MA	10 months, 4 and 12 years
11	12/2 t (F worked 70%, M part-time student)	Academic sector BA/student	Academic sector PhD	2 and 6 years
12	12/3 s	Academic sector MA	Private sector MA	13 months, 3 years
13	12/3 s	Public sector BA/student	Private sector Vocational study	7 months, 3 and 8 years
14	16/3 t	Freelance MA	Public sector MA	16 months

Note: M, mother; F, Father; s, separate; t, together.

of action for both parents and prevent the income drop currently brought about by mothers stretching the leave. Making this move requires policy-makers to take into account all the different factors that play into the strategies parents employ when arranging care for their young children, including the considerable investments people have in gender.

### Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Arnlaug Leira, Nicole Hennem, Margunn Bjørnholt and Kari Stefansen for their support and help while writing this article. I also wish to thank the anonymous referees for their useful and insightful comments to my manuscript.

### Notes

1. The Nordic countries/Nordic region (Norden) consists of Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland and Iceland. The term Scandinavia usually refers to Norway, Sweden and Denmark.
2. In Icelandic, the term 'Fæðingarorlof' directly translates into 'birth leave', used both for maternal and paternal leave.
3. The policy of dividing the leave between the parents on a 'use-or-lose' basis has been pursued also into a new bill in 2012 (Þingskjal 877, [www.althingi.is](http://www.althingi.is)) gradually increasing the full leave, aiming at a system by the year 2016 where mothers and fathers receive five months each and can divide two months between them as they like.
4. The benefits described in this section pertain to married/cohabiting couples who are active in the labour market. Benefits for single parents, unemployed parents and students may differ from these.
5. About 60% of Iceland's inhabitants live in the capital area of Reykjavik and its neighbouring municipalities.
6. The official name for these childminders is 'dagforeldrar' (day-parents); however, since the great majority of these childminders are women, they are commonly called 'dagamma', which directly translates into day-mother.
7. See Table 1 for overview of the participants in the study.

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