The child’s best and constructions of motherhood and fatherhood in Sweden: At the crossroads of biology and equality

Jenny Alsarve, Katarina Boye and Christine Roman
The couples’ plans

- Parental leave policy: Approx. 16 month, 2 reserved for each parent, most of it reimbursed at 80 % (with a cap)

- Couples’ typical parental leave plans
  - From equal division (11 couples, 5 of which are open to being flexible)...
  - ...to woman more or all (7+1) or man more (1)

- Part-time legal right of all parents with children ≤ 8 yrs

- Couples’ plans for paid work after parental leave: Both full-time or one or both part-time
Shared parenting

- Close relation with both parents good for the child
  - Fathers’ parental leave
  - Fathers caring on their own

- Father’s relationship stressed – mother’s taken for granted.

- Decisions on care arrangements and working hours generally taken together

- Shared parenting officially promoted since the 70’s (earner-carer model).
The (very) participating father

- Construction of a new fatherhood
  - Equally present in everyday life and practical care
  - Takes rather long parental leave
  - May work part-time
  - Cares in his own way

- Not only ideal but actual plans.

- Some: Important to be gender equal role models and/or that the child’s development was not restricted by its gender.

- Close father-child relationship, and gender equality, promoted, e.g., with the ‘daddy-months’ (father caring by himself).
Breastfeeding and good mothering

- Motherhood discussed in connection with breastfeeding, the child needs the mother physically.

- In a few cases motherhood was discussed in relation to a special bond between mother and child.

- Breastfeeding sometimes associated with general care → traditional division of care during this period (approx. 6-7 month).

- Untraditional division of housework not related to direct care (cleaning house, washing).

- Breastfeeding one important motive behind parental leave plans – even though there were some uncertainty about the duration of breastfeeding.
Resistance to motherhood norms

- Some women explicitly did not want to turn into the main carers of the small baby.
  - Bottle-feeding was discussed as one solution.

- Some women discussed the risk of becoming the “supervisor of the family”.
  - Men’s (long) parental leave discussed as one solution.

- Questioning of the female part-time norm.

- Some stressed that motherhood will not become a primary identity.
Traditionalism and gender equality combined

- One couple appears more traditional, but still stresses the importance of the father’s presence and participation.

- Ideals of gender equality and equal parenting are sometimes combined with
  - traditional motherhood and fatherhood ideals
  - a view on female and male gender as complementary, different but equal
Public versus parental care

- Licensed child care taken for granted
  - Expansion of public childcare politically important for a long time.

- Proper age to start is 1-2 years:
  - At approx. age 1,5 children require social interaction and pedagogical activities.
  - First develop social and oral skills.
  - Length of planned parental leave.
  - C.f. legal right to childcare from age 1 (full-time); parental leave approx. 1,5 yrs

- Too long days or many days/week is detrimental
  - Too long = 40 hrs/week
  - Too many days – small children
  - Parents legal right to long part-time
Summary

- Perceptions of good parenting well in line with institutional and, often, cultural context.

- Earner-carer model in practice
  - Good institutional support
  - Some social and cultural resistance
  - Some adjustments of perceptions of equality to fit notions of gender differences