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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Social Reproduction: Intra-Household Relations, Organizational Initiatives and Public Policies

Glimpses of change? UK fathers navigating work and care within the context of Shared Parental Leave

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Abstract

This study focuses on the lived experiences of 25 professionally employed UK fathers who are first-wave beneficiaries of Shared Parental Leave (SPL), which facilitated a period of leave from work during their child's first year. Using exploratory qualitative interviews, we investigate the ways in which family relations, organizational initiatives, and public policy collaborate to disrupt or transform what have hitherto been traditional gendered expectations around early infant care. Our understanding is framed using Giddens' democratic family and notions of "undoing gender". Our longitudinal design allows us to capture fathers' lived experiences at two points, firstly pre/during their period of SPL and secondly following their return to work. In seeking glimpses of change, we first explore this at the level of men's *disruption* of generational biographies, then how fathers *navigate* SPL policy within a contested gendered context, and finally their subsequent *transformations* in work/care practices. We discuss the implications for policy, recognizing shortcomings in the current design of UK leave offerings.

KEYWORDS

democratic family, fathers, gender equality, infant care, Shared Parental Leave

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1 | INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on the potential for what Bach and Aarseth (2016) term the “unsettling” of neo-traditional work–family patterns integral to social reproduction. UK mothers spend more than twice the time performing domestic tasks than fathers, and this is informed by structural factors, such as the design of work–family policy and the gender wage gap (Norman, 2017). However, there is also evidence that gender attitudes are changing, with more attention being given to men’s roles as fathers both within policy frameworks and work settings (Gatrell et al., 2015). Shared Parental Leave (SPL) was introduced in the United Kingdom in 2015, enabling mothers/primary adopters to transfer up to 50-week maternity leave to their partners. SPL has received much criticism for its design and other eligibility barriers (TUC, 2015), and it is estimated that just 2% of eligible new parents took leave in 2019 (Howlett, 2020). However, given that fathers who share childcare equally in the first year are more likely to remain involved when the child is three (Norman, 2017), SPL provides a context within which to explore how fathers navigate work and care.

Using longitudinal qualitative interviews, we draw on the experiences of 25 UK fathers who have taken SPL. Whereas existing research on parents’ SPL intentions documents motivational and affordability barriers (Twamley, 2020); to the best of our knowledge, this study is the first to specifically capture the lived experiences of fathers who have utilized SPL. We ask whether, at the level of lived experience, SPL has the potential to disrupt or unsettle what have hitherto been traditional gendered expectations around early infant care (Dermott & Miller, 2015). Our findings demonstrate the familial impacts of SPL on gender relations by focusing on men’s *disruption* of generational biographies, then how fathers *navigate* SPL policy within a contested gendered context, and finally their subsequent *transformations* in work/care practices. Giddens’ (2008) writings on the democratic family inform our theoretical framing and we also link to work around “undoing gender” (Deusch, 2007).

We first outline existing literature focused on the organization of social reproduction and the detraditionalization of fatherhood, we provide an overview of the leave that is available for mothers and fathers in the United Kingdom, and finally link this to Giddens’ (2008) ideals relating to the democratic family. Next, we outline our study, following this up with our findings. In our discussion, we reflect on where glimpses of change relating to work/care practices could be identified while acknowledging shortcomings relating to the UK family leave framework.

2 | SOCIAL REPRODUCTION AND THE DETRADITIONALIZATION OF FATHERHOOD

Gender and generational relations are integral to how social reproduction is organized, with parenting often informed by essentialist assumptions surrounding caregiving and paid work (Lyonette & Crompton, 2015). While social reproduction is shaped and influenced by institutions such as the workplace and the state, one of the most important sites within which it is both “done” and contested is the family (Gatrell, 2005). The gendered division of care work and its inequity within the family is long established (Duffy, 2005), with parenthood accentuating existing divisions and having “the potential to divide egalitarian couples along more traditional lines” (Faircloth, 2020, p. 3).

Breadwinning continues to inform fatherhood practices (Brannen & Nilsen, 2006), with mothers shouldering much of the burden of childcare, but research has identified some important shifts. Lamb’s (1987) seminal work highlighted fathers moving away from traditional discourse toward more involved, nurturing fatherhood roles, as reflected in labor market changes (Williams, 2008). Fatherhood is becoming detraditionalized, with more recent articulations of intimate fatherhood (Dermott, 2008) downplaying (but not dismissing) breadwinning in favor of a more emotionally connected, present, and child-focused fatherhood model.

However, while the legitimacy of participative fatherhood is growing, the experiences of “working fathers,” who take advantage of workplace policies to accommodate work/family commitments, have not yet been conceptualized (Kangas et al., 2019). Involved, working fathers remain “ghosts” in the organizational machine (Burnett et al., 2013), with work–life balance policies labeled highly gendered, failing to acknowledge the involved paternal role (Børve & Bungum, 2015). Involved fathers have been found to encounter inequitable treatment in the workplace when

attempting to reduce their working hours (Cook et al., 2020), discouraged by employers to prioritize childcare commitments (Miller, 2010). A range of state policies increasingly aim to embed and enhance fathers' positions as equal co-parents within family life (Brandth & Kvande, 2001) and it is to this policy context we now turn.

3 | UK LEAVE POLICY

UK leave provision for parents has primarily focused on maternity leave. Since 2008, women are entitled to take 52 weeks of leave, receiving Statutory Maternity Pay (SMP) for up to 39 weeks; 6 of which are paid at 90% of earnings, followed by 33 weeks at a low statutory level (which employers may enhance). This model of long, but comparatively poorly rewarded, leave for mothers risks firmly positioning women as early caregivers (Gatrell et al., 2015) and men as breadwinners (Kaufman & Almqvist, 2017).

The UK lags behind many European countries in terms of designated leave for fathers. Two weeks paternity leave (paid at statutory rate, unless enhanced by employers) were introduced in 2003. While all eligible UK employees can also access a total entitlement of 18 weeks unpaid parental leave for each child, to be taken before the child's 18th birthday, this individual unpaid entitlement is usually limited to 4 weeks per year. Opportunities for UK fathers to take leave, therefore, run contrary to international evidence which emphasizes the importance of reserved leave, and the extent to which pay informs take-up (Moss & O'Brien, 2019).

The introduction of SPL in April 2015 was positioned as a radical development in UK leave policy, when in reality the changes were incremental. Additional Paternity Leave (APL), implemented in 2011, allowed mothers/main adopters to transfer untaken leave and statutory pay (20 weeks post birth/adoption) to their partners. Under SPL, maternity leave can be converted earlier; any time after 2–4 weeks, depending on the nature of employment. SPL is potentially longer (up to 50 weeks) and eligible fathers/partners have greater flexibility in the way leave can be taken (e.g., discontinuously/parents on leave concurrently; BIS, 2014).

Parents taking SPL are eligible for Statutory Shared Parental Pay (ShPP¹) for 39 weeks, the remaining 11 weeks are unpaid. Employers may enhance ShPP and this is sometimes, but not always, in line with maternity packages. While there should be consistency of benefits within a scheme (regardless of the recipient's gender), there is no onus on employers to create an occupational SPL scheme.² International evidence points to the relevance of remuneration to the take-up of leave by fathers (e.g., Bueno & Grau-Grau, 2021; Moss & O'Brien, 2019). Given the United Kingdom's low level of statutory pay, an employer's decision to enhance ShPP can therefore be a crucial factor in fathers' decisions to take leave, reflecting a susceptibility to "institutional conversion factors" (Koslowski & Kadar-Satat, 2019).

In addition, maternal transfer models are likely to discourage paternal uptake (Moss & Deven, 2006) with fathers' use of leave increasing when they have an earmarked, ringfenced and non-transferable element reserved for them (Brandth & Kvande, 2016). SPL, therefore, supports existing cultures of parenting with mother-centered leave (Brandth & Kvande, 2001), normative expectations surrounding mothers of small children (Dermott & Miller, 2015), and elements of maternal gatekeeping (Miller, 2018).

Those European countries positioned by O'Brien (2009) as "premier league" more clearly prioritize gender equality, offering non-transferable leave, and high-income replacement as integral aspects of state policies. SPL take-up is low, and figures reveal just 2% of eligible UK couples took leave in 2019 (Howlett, 2020). However, it is difficult to make more of international comparisons, given differences in how employment and welfare are organized, with employer enhancement a less common feature (Kamerma & Moss, 2011).

4 | SPL: TOWARD A DEMOCRATIC FAMILY ORIENTATION?

The language employed by government ministers and SPL guidance (BIS, 2014) emphasizes choice and flexibility. It echoes Beck's (2002) "negotiated family" and Giddens' (2008) writings on the ideology and optimism for the "democratic family," a family form that does not comply with traditional gendered assumptions (Ahlberg et al., 2008) with shared and negotiated authority, particularly regarding childcare decisions. This contemporary family form implies "shared responsibility for childcare, especially greater sharing among women and men...[as] mothers are bearing a disproportional share of the costs (and enjoying a disproportional share of the emotional rewards) of children" (Giddens, 2008, p. 94–95). These democratic ideals are exhibited in pure relationships, which have mutual understandings, rights, and obligations and are based upon open communication like democratic ideals in public life (Giddens, 2008). Within the democratic family, nuclear family norms and assumptions surrounding the gendered division of labor dissolve, with equal, democratic roles assumed by parents in relation to childcare. Untethered by ascribed gender roles, fathers increasingly participate in the private world of caregiving and foreground relationships with children (Ahlberg et al., 2008), enabling mothers (at the level of ideology, at least) to participate in the labor market (De Vaus, 2009). Giddens' (2008) democratic family principles inform the transformation of family life—facilitating continual discussion and decision-making among couples in relation to how childcare is organized between them. This leads us to consider West and Zimmerman's (1987) seminal work around "doing gender," and Deutsch's (2007) more recent encouragement for researchers to shift their understandings to the processes by which existing gender relations can be undone. While there are wider elements involved, including structural changes (e.g., women's admittance into high-paying professions), men's involvement in early childcare is crucial (Norman, 2017).

Prior work has explored a range of ways heterosexual parents approach childcare along less traditional gender lines (informed by democratic family principles). This includes what Deutsch (2007) refers to as "equally sharing parents" whereby fathers "unsettle" the neo-traditional work and family pattern through "hands on" versions of fathering or "switching" of gender roles. Such fathers adopt more home-based roles and are presented as going "against the norm," what Brannen and Nilsen (2006) refer to as a detraditionalization of fatherhood. Bach and Aarseth (2016) focus on men whose female partner's job takes center stage, exploring the cultural work necessary to "disconnect their (male) position from paid employment and breadwinning" (p. 186). Hodkinson and Brooks (2018) develop understanding of a discourse of interchangeability, demonstrating how fathers position their equivalent parenting performances. However, Chelsey (2011) argues it is economic shifts, not choice, that often facilitate less traditional arrangements, with employment conditions pushing some men into at-home fatherhood. Some fathers value their new positioning which has "potential to translate into institutional change, particularly when parents re-enter the labor force" (Chelsey, 2011, p. 661). While this may signal a move away from a "single model of unified masculinities" (Morgan, 2002, p. 280), it perhaps more closely represents what Dermott and Miller (2015, p. 189) term a "glimpse... of reconfigured parenting practices."

When Ahlberg et al. (2008) considered the experiences of more "gender equal" cultural contexts within the lens of the democratic family, they cast doubts on the potential for "free negotiation and open communication." They argue, for example, that while Sweden's relatively progressive leave policy is celebrated, gender norms continue to shape parents' negotiations, resulting in arrangements "compatible with people's notions of 'proper' female and male" (Ahlberg et al., 2008, p. 88). These concerns echo Beck's (2002) cautions against considering the family as distinct from broader considerations of work, equality, finances, and the social structures in which family life is experienced. While leave schemes are important, they cannot be separated from the broader picture of potentially contradictory relations of industrial society. Beck (2002) suggests change can only be accomplished through rethinking entire institutional structures in order for a new type of equality *beyond* male and female roles to be achieved, step by step.

In summary, prior studies suggest that while family policy can support the emergence of more democratic family ideals, policies have to be carefully designed to promote gender equality goals. There have been a handful of UK academic studies which have mainly focused on the barriers (Birkett & Forbes, 2019) and negotiations around taking SPL (Twamley, 2020), but there has been little attention given to fathers' experiences related to leave and the impact

on families' work/care orientations. In specifically exploring gender disruptions at the level of lived experiences, this study responds to Deutsch's (2007) encouragement to report change in gender relations wherever it can be seen, alongside the revealing nature of individual interaction. We engage with the "slow dripping" perspective of change (Ranson, 2011) and reflect on the way in which structural change (e.g., policy) interacts with organizations and family life to inform potential transformations within both families and workplaces.

5 | THE STUDY

We adopted a longitudinal design (2015–2018) recruiting 25 fathers who planned to take or were currently taking SPL (Table 1). A call for participants was advertised via parenting groups (e.g., National Childbirth Trust), advocacy groups (e.g., Fatherhood Institute), personal contacts, and circulation via social media (e.g., Twitter, Facebook) in line with Brooks and Hodkinson (2020). We recognize this approach (self-selection) may have increased the likelihood of those taking significant portions of leave to volunteer, with the fathers taking between 1 and 9 months of SPL and the majority (20/25) taking 3 months or more. While acknowledging the reach limitations of social media, given the eligibility criteria for SPL, and other barriers (Twamley, 2020), our sample is broadly reflective of the profiles of men who have access to leave (Birkett & Forbes, 2019). The majority were first-time fathers, although eight already had children, which Redshaw and Henderson (2013) suggest makes them less likely to be involved in childcare. The men were heterosexual, biological parents, and located in England, with concentrations within the South-East and North-West regions.

Occupations and salaries varied, with participants mainly from white-collar occupations. They were generally university educated, and all but Ganesh (British Asian) identified as white British, reflective of prior studies in this area (Brooks & Hodkinson, 2020). Each participant was in a dual-earner relationship and fitted the eligibility criteria for SPL in terms of their employee status. SPL design and constraints meant it was more likely to be taken by those couples who were financially secure and where the father's employer is enhancing ShPP (Twamley & Schober, 2019). As can be seen in Table 1, 12 fathers received pay enhancement for a period (2–7.5 months); 11 out of these 12 only took leave within the fully enhanced period. However, the remainder of our sample (13) took leave without access to employer enhancement. In the majority of these cases where fathers relied on ShPP (or unpaid SPL), the men's earnings were less than their partner, putting these women among the 33% of UK mothers who are main breadwinners (Corey & Stirling, 2016).

Where possible, two in-depth interviews were conducted with each father: once following the birth of their child (either before, or during SPL) and then following their return to work (post-SPL). The interviews were conversational in nature, incorporating informants' own concerns and experiences (Henwood & Procter, 2003), as well as a number of areas identified in advance. The first interview explored participants' transition to fatherhood, their hopes and expectations of fatherhood and leave, as well as their discussions with partners, friends, family, and employers around leave intentions. During this first interview, we did not specifically explore participants' employment intentions after SPL, although as with other topics this was an emergent discussion with some men. The second interview explored reflections on the leave period, return to work, and on-going experiences of combining work and care. Interviews lasted between 60 and 150 min, with the first interviews generally slightly longer than the second. Interviews were conducted by both authors, each taking responsibility for approximately half of the participants, allowing the development of rapport. In six cases, as highlighted in Table 1, only one interview took place (either because the participant was unavailable for a follow-up interview or because they contributed at the end of their SPL). We worked around the preferences of participants in relation to data collection. This resulted in a mixture of in-person, telephone, and video-enabled interviews, with the former mainly conducted within the father's home setting and the latter accommodating fathers' work/care commitments (Brooks & Hodkinson, 2020).

Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Ethical guidelines were followed, with university ethics committee approval secured. A multi-stage approach to data analysis was adopted. Data were initially analyzed

TABLE 1 Participant information table

Pseudonym	Age	Occupation	No. of children	SPL arrangement time/pay	Post SPL employment changes ^b
Aiden	30	Civil servant	1	6 months (3-month full pay; 3-month ShPP)	Initially FT then PT 4 days per week
Bob ^a	32	Council	1	3 months (unpaid)	None/FT
Brian	32	Solicitor	3	6 months (ShPP)	PT 3 days (self-employed)
Craig	44	Lecturer	1	6 months (ShPP)	Compressed hours initially then PT 3 days
Damien	35	Engineer	2 (twins)	4 months (ShPP)	PT 4 days
Dan ^a	35	Chemist	1	4 months (ShPP)	None/FT
Dean	33	Communications (public sector)	2	2 months (full pay)	None/FT
Dominic	37	Civil servant	1	7 months (3-month ShPP)	PT 3 days
Dylan	34	Administrator	1	3 months (ShPP)	PT 2 days
Ganesh	36	Civil servant	1	2 months (full pay)	None/FT
Jeremy ^a	37	Catering	1	9 months (ShPP)	Redundancy
Joe ^a	44	Communications	2	3 months (full pay)	None/FT
Keith ^a	31	IT consultant	1	3 months (ShPP)	PT 4 days
Kevin	30	Nurse	1	1 month (ShPP)	PT, 0.6 FTE (shifts)
Martin	41	Managing director	1	7.5 months (full pay)	None/FT
Max	31	Healthcare assistant	2	2 months (ShPP)	Still FT, but moved roles to benefit from fixed shift patterns
Michael	38	Researcher	2	6 months (full pay)	PT 4.5 days in 4
Paul	59	Publishing	4	5 months (ShPP) + 1 month of holiday	Redundancy
Peter	34	Software engineer	1	6 months (full pay) ^c	None/FT
Ryan	37	Engineer	1	3 months (full pay)	FT/compressed hours (1 morning off p/w)
Sam	32	Administrator	1	2 months (ShPP)	Stay-at-home dad
Simon	35	IT consultant	2	6 months (full pay)	PT 3 days
Steven	32	Solicitor	1	3 months (full pay)	None/FT
Stuart ^a	35	Management consultant	2	3 months (full pay)	None/FT
Thomas	33	Solicitor	1	5 months (full pay)	None/FT

^aParticipated in one interview.

^bFormal changes to employment (others discussed informal changes, for example, finishing on time, returning home for bath time).

^cOfficially 6 months but spread over year part-time: informal arrangement with line manager as outside SPL rules.

from a within-case perspective whereby the two authors individually formed an overall impression of each father's experiences (Henwood & Procter, 2003). This led to the exchange of memos prompting further discussion, which encouraged us to reflexively engage with our own gendered positions (Mason, 2002), which continued throughout the analysis and interpretation process. Second, we each engaged with first round coding using an approach similar to Strauss and Corbin's (1990) open-coding process. Together we then reviewed the coding scheme, in particular identifying opportunities to combine codes (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Finally, we refined our codes, developing

themes or “rich descriptions of the specific phenomena” (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 233) in order to forge an agreed interpretation.

6 | FINDINGS

We focus on how men navigated contested environments of the “institutional triangle”: the family (labor), market, and state. In seeking glimpses of change, we first explore this at the level of men's generational biographies, illustrating how participants disrupted gendered expectations of their fathering roles. Second, we explore how fathers navigated SPL policy within a contested gendered context. Third, we discuss fathers' post-SPL experiences as they relate to traditional gendered norms, and SPL's potential to disrupt these norms. The disruptions we report are somewhat limited to pockets of adjustments within the familial or workplace context, yet hint at the potential for wider transformations. Deutsch (2007) argues that in the interests of encouraging change in gender relations, researchers should be committed to reporting change wherever seen. This highlights a need to consider, rather than dismiss as insignificant, the many slow changes in gender relations that may be taking place; we tentatively refer to these as “glimpses of change” reflecting language employed by Dermott and Miller (2015).

6.1 | Disrupting generational biographies: Paternal deficiencies and (involved) fathering

In this section, we highlight how participants' decisions surrounding SPL were informed by primary socialization and hereditary production of attitudes, yet also reflect how men and women “create gender” rather than necessarily internalizing practices and behaviors that are handed down (Deutsch, 2007, p. 107). Thomas (5 months³) was unusual within our sample given his father was hands on and worked flexibly to accommodate childcare. Thomas is keen to replicate non-traditional gender roles within his own family to ensure that he too is present for his son and not adopting “a Victorian style of fatherhood.”

The majority of our participants, however, referenced the “poor” and “non-existent” role their father played, reflective of Williams (2008) and what Kaufman (2013) terms “old dads” who face little work–family conflict. They consciously tried to “willingly distance” themselves (Lupu et al., 2018) from their fathers' breadwinner precedent, moving toward involved fatherhood. This motivated decisions to take SPL with the men wanting to “better” their own, often absent, father's role. Ganesh (2 months) relayed how his parents separated when he was 5 years old leaving his mother to single parent:

I want to be there with my children to do the things that he didn't do with my brother and myself. And I want to be more hands on than he was, and maybe it's unfair to think that he wouldn't have been hands on if he was around, but he wasn't around, so I'll never know

Other participants criticized their father's unquestioning breadwinner role. Simon's father suggested taking SPL was “a risky thing to do” for his career progression, but Simon consciously chose to disrupt his career path, based on his father's unhappiness/poor familial relationships. Simon (6 months) attributed this to his father's breadwinning ideology and excessive work practices, which was even more interesting given the pair worked together for the same employer before his father's retirement:

Towards the end of my dad's career, he was totally miserable at work, and he hated his job. I was, kind of, following in his footsteps and making the same mistakes...I thought crikey, I'm seeing my dad go through all this pain and I'm heading down pretty much exactly the same path...that's something I don't want to be doing.

Simon also linked his stay-at-home mother's childcare burden with the "waste of her education" and potential: "she was the first person in her family, the first to have a university degree. She's a qualified biologist out of university, but then she stopped working when she had me." Simon's primary socialization experiences are largely emblematic of other participants where it was their father's career that was prioritized, constraining employment options available to mothers.

Although McGinn et al. (2019) find links between maternal employment and the greater participation of adult sons in domestic spheres, with sons raised by stay-at-home mothers spending less time on childcare, this is not reflected in our data. Childcare demands placed on participant's mothers appeared to fuel their more hands-on approach with the men purposefully moving away from their parent's "outdated" familial arrangements. While others have seen participants re-enacting entrenched dispositions embodied during their upbringing (Lupu et al., 2018), this was not evident.

6.2 | Navigating SPL: Contested gendered social contexts

We now turn to consider how gender-equality ideals were both facilitated and constrained by SPL, highlighting some of the complexity eligible couples experienced when navigating leave. Discussion took place within a contested social environment where traditions and gendered assumptions about parenting roles/norms operate alongside various other employment and financial considerations.

Despite our participants' desire for hands-on fatherhood, the maternal orientation of SPL restricted experiences of choice, undermining policy rhetoric. Access was governed by mothers' initial ownership of leave (O'Brien & Twamley, 2017), which facilitates maternal gatekeeping (Miller, 2018). Stuart (3 months) positioned SPL as having to "steal that time away from my wife," and Bob (3 months) identified gendered norms as informing limits to his time on leave: "I think she just had it in her mind that is what you always got when you're on maternity leave, so I think that's why she wanted to have nine months." While the men wanted to take leave, they recognized decisions around leave as mother-led, with any time gifted to them (McKay & Doucet, 2010). Aligned to this was the association of breastfeeding with "good" mothering and its perceived incompatibility with worker identities (Lee, 2018). Infant-feeding considerations helped shape patterns of leave (McKay & Doucet, 2010), as Kevin (1 month) illustrates: "that really does limit how much SPL dads can take. If you're breastfeeding, you can't really take it until the six-months mark, unless mum is able to express a lot of the milk."

Most fathers reported detailed calculations regarding the financial consequences of leave decisions, incorporating "number crunching" to navigate the financial viability of leave patterns. Spreadsheets were used to keep track of finances (e.g., comparisons between SMP, ShPP, and enhancements), demonstrating advantages for those parents with the necessary time, skills, and resources to work out these financial implications. Simon's employer supported SPL making it not only viable, but financially beneficial: "it works out financially better for us for me to be on leave than it does for Claire because she only gets statutory pay" (Simon, 6 months).

When employer enhancement was not available, fathers reported using savings and reducing non-essential expenditure, demonstrating how the current policy framework benefits those with financial flexibility. There was one financial scenario which was largely absent from our research encounters wherein the father's earnings are higher, *and* he is taking leave on ShPP. Given the gender pay gap and low numbers of employers enhancing ShPP (BITC, 2018), this will be the most familiar to heterosexual couples embarking on parenthood.

Variety in employer schemes and their impact demonstrates the vital role institutions play in supporting SPL and contesting gendered norms in work and care. Differential levels of enhancement were sometimes offered for men and women within the same organization and time period (e.g., maternity scheme vs. SPL). Negotiations were also restricted by particular caveats, with some employers only enhancing ShPP if leave was taken continuously or at a set time (e.g., within the first 6 months/at quiet times/on completion of key tasks). The demands of work and perceived

workplace resistance influence or constrain the leave choices men made (Brandth & Kvande, 2016). Ryan (3 months) said: "I didn't feel like I could push for the full 12-weeks and he [manager] was being a bit resistant to the whole thing."

For several couples there was a more purposeful approach adopted, reflecting commitment to particular family goals such as the mother's career progression. Aiden (6 months) highlights his partner's wish to take a comparatively short 3-month maternity leave:

Saira was definitely at that point that she wasn't going to be, wouldn't be wanting to take the kind of typical maternity year where you're off for a full 12-months. She really loves her job. She really enjoys using her brain and that aspect of it and she was worried about kind of being off for that length of time.

However, Aiden reported he and Saira experienced critical feedback on their decision (focused on the length of her maternity leave), illustrating how gendered expectations and traditions have the potential to constrain decisions even when other elements are facilitative. In Aiden's case, the leave decision was primarily informed by Saira's career (Reimer, 2020), but also his own relative job security and wider workplace support for SPL/working fathers. In a small number of cases decisions were informed by fathers' own career ambivalence. Paul, for example, recognized his wife's career as having "potential to go and go." He took 5 months of SPL (un-enhanced) following his wife's unsuccessful promotion: "my career is stable and I'm not going anywhere unless I get booted out, but I'm not going up the greasy-pole and I don't particularly want to."

6.3 | Transforming work/care practices: Glimpses of change

We now turn to reflect on the potential for further disruption or transformation of gendered assumptions surrounding care, with particular attention given to the unsettling of men's traditional work patterns. We do not suggest SPL heralds a new dramatic era in family forms (particularly given low uptake and policy shortcomings), yet we do see glimpses of change whereby childcare decisions were less tethered to traditional gender norms. Following leave, 13 fathers (see Table 1) made formal adjustments to their working practices, pursuing what Bueno and Grau-Grau (2021) refer to as a gender-egalitarian strategy. Ten returned part-time, and in addition, Ryan began working compressed hours, Max moved role (benefitting from fixed hours), and Sam became a stay-at-home father (using SPL to "test out" this new status). Two further participants (Paul/Jeremy) were made redundant but positioned this as an opportunity to explore family-friendly employment options. Taking SPL afforded participants transformational experiences, informing subsequent adjustments to employment practices.

SPL also offered participants time to reassess what was important to them/their family. For several participants, this involved distancing themselves from ideal professional worker norms, which Reid (2015) recognizes as centering on long working hours and constant availability. Simon (6 months) who returned to work part-time acknowledged: "before SPL I felt really dedicated and committed and prepared to work as long as it took and as many hours as it took...work is a secondary priority now." SPL was experienced as what Lupu et al. (2020) term a "disruptive episode" (albeit in less dramatic ways than illness/bereavement), helping participants reconfigure work/family commitments.

Brian (6 months) returned to work part-time/self-employed, a move that reflected dissatisfaction with former work practices and their fit with his new caring responsibilities. This common move among mothers post-maternity leave (Radcliffe & Cassell, 2015) allowed Brian "to take work a little less seriously, put it more into context and almost become more relaxed...I feel like not necessarily caring less, but it [work] feels less important now...I feel a little bit more distant, but in a good way." Post-SPL, Brian looks after his children 2 days a week (the days his wife works: "we swap round on a Wednesday and Thursday"), describing parenting as interchangeable and a mutually shared endeavor (Hodkinson & Brooks, 2018). It should be noted that Brian had experienced fatherhood before, but it was his SPL experience (and partner's career development) that pushed him to reconfigure work/care patterns.

This new, or at least reaffirmed, outlook on work/family emerged strongly across our dataset and reflects what Kaufman (2013, p. 198) terms superdads, who “fit work around family life.” These men shared a commitment to gender equality at both home and work, as Keith (1 month) whose partner assumed the primary breadwinner role comments: “it shouldn’t be the default that the mum’s the one that stays at home, the mum’s the one that sort of takes a back seat with her career.” Keith’s example (like Dylan/Kevin) demonstrates how even relatively brief periods of SPL appear sufficient to prompt ongoing adjustments to work/care balance.

Ten participants made no formal adjustments to their working hours, post-SPL. The existing flexibility offered by their employer as well as other career considerations fed into this decision. These fathers perhaps fit best with what Kaufman (2013) terms “new dads” who make small adjustments to their work practices from within the current system. Only Peter (6 months) explained this in purely financial terms. Peter’s wife is self-employed, with her wage often fluctuating, so the family were reliant on his income. However, despite a lack of *formal* adjustment, all the men reported more closely monitoring their working hours. Thomas (5 months) highlights his transformed work ethos, adamant he has ‘no intention’ of falling back into excessive patterns:

The reality is that if the shit hit the fan, then before I’d be the person who’d stick around and fix it. And I think now I’m much more focused on the fact that if the shit hits the fan, the likelihood of me sticking around and fixing it, it’s just not going to happen, because I have to be gone.

While participants described constraints connected to SPL, the ability to take leave (and resultant experiences), facilitated wider conversations and release from gendered expectations. Post-SPL work/care practices were more in keeping with Giddens’ (2008) democratic family, challenging longstanding assumptions surrounding gendered care provision. For example, while Steven (3 months) returned to work full-time, he reflects on the equality of his parenting approach:

I’ve said this to Annie [partner] and other people, if it came to a choice of one of us having to give up work to look after him full-time for one reason or another, it’s a reasonable chance it would be me rather than her.

Others expressed the link between SPL and feelings of democracy more explicitly. Fathers like Dominic (7 months) compared their parenting experiences with others without this opportunity, further illustrating a discourse of interchangeability (Hodkinson & Brooks, 2018):

He responds really well to both of us, and he’s comforted by both of us, so if he hurts himself, he’ll reach out for the one who’s closest to him... I really feel for them [fathers who do not experience this] because, you know, obviously they want to connect with their kids, but their kids always run off to their mums, but he doesn’t really do that.

Dominic’s wider experiences suggest a gendered norm whereby young children “are still very clingy to their mums” when they are hurt or upset. He suggests enthusiasm for more involved or intimate fathering (Dermott, 2008), which he sees as limited for fathers without a period of time alone with their child. SPL afforded participants a period freed from work constraints to gain mastery in parenting (Rehel, 2014), granting them confidence to make changes in work/care configurations after leave had ended.

At the very least, these lived experiences reflect small steps toward the normalization of men performing infant care roles. Martin (7.5 months) reflects on the ability of positive personal experiences to inform wider transformations: “equality starts with small steps. It’s going to take a while to change. It’s a big cultural change.” These sentiments were consistent across participants: the men felt privileged to have spent significant time with their young child,

something that for mothers is often an assumed right or duty. Regardless of the wider transformative potential of SPL in its current form, we cannot deny its impact at the level of lived experience.

7 | DISCUSSION

This study explores the relevance of UK fathers' everyday practices and their potential to disrupt contested gendered pictures within the context of work/care; a process that Deutsch (2007) termed "undoing gender." Giddens (2008) suggests ideals of the democratic family (incorporating equality, respect, and autonomy) should help guide family policy initiatives which prioritize a more equal society. With this in mind, we explore UK fathers' experiences of SPL, in particular how they navigate the sometimes-conflicting areas of work/care and potentially disrupt traditional gendered expectations. We focused on (1) how fathers sought to disrupt generational biographies, particularly in cases where their own father took on a traditional breadwinning role; (2) fathers' reflections on how couples navigated the policy including negotiating the various options available to them; (3) how a number of our participants subsequently transformed their work practices to ensure a pronounced hands-on fathering role. We shed light on the familial impacts of SPL and its potential legacy, taking on board Ranson's (2011) recommendation to identify and report change at the level of lived experiences.

Our findings provide illustrations of how SPL facilitates men's motivations and confidence to move from what Kaufman (2013) terms "new dads," those who balance work and care within existing boundaries and traditions, to "super dads," fitting work around their family life. While most participants experienced traditional gendered family structures in childhood, it was clear they wanted something different for their own family. In particular their own fathers' roles (whether "absent" or "present") informed a move toward more pronounced involvement, motivating them in their attempts to unsettle gendered work/care expectations. Fathers' reflections on how they navigated SPL policy included negotiations with their partners around the decision to take SPL, and the length of leave. This also necessitated navigating a fairly complex set of rules within the context of a maternally orientated policy and informed by financial situations, employment contexts, expectations, and gendered discourses. Couples behaved in line with Giddens' (2008) democratic model, with more open discussions based on the needs of their family and wider practicalities. We saw less emphasis on gendered expectations, in contrast to the couples in Twamley's (2020) study, where equality and shared responsibility are seemingly downplayed.

Where we report the main disruptions to gender norms are in the third section of our findings focused on men's return to work, and most notably transformations to their work patterns. While Schober and Zoch (2019) found that fathers who take *more* parental leave experience greater shifts away from a gender-traditional division of domestic labor after childbirth, this pattern was not evident. Rather we argue that given aforementioned constraints surrounding SPL eligibility and choices, it is the *intention* to take leave (rather than necessarily the length of leave taken) that appears instrumental in shaping subsequent work/life reconfigurations. With this in mind it is important to note that while these fathers reported more democratic family types, what Ahlberg et al. refer to as a 'negotiated family' (2008, p. 80), their wider experiences run counter to Giddens' (2008) ideal which would necessitate a more radical public policy that incentivizes couples to take a more gender-equal approach to work/care.

Despite the barriers, limitations, and constraints associated with SPL, and the wider gendered culture, fathers' reflections of the necessary navigation (of the policy), negotiation (with partners and employers), and active disruption, provided compelling lived examples of Giddens' (2008) democratic family form. This was illustrated by fathers prioritizing relationships with their children in their work/care decisions, and also through prioritizing qualities which Giddens (2008) ascribes to this family form (e.g., mutual respect, autonomy, equality).

Ironically, the United Kingdom's imperfect and complex SPL system may provide a gateway for more democratic family forms to emerge. The decision to disrupt gender norms by taking SPL could increase fathers' confidence and propensity to then make formal and pronounced changes to their employment patterns. For the majority of our participants, this resulted in an equal, "interchangeable" (Hodkinson & Brooks, 2018), or primary caregiver role, which

is framed and understood with respect to women's career goals and opportunities. On the one hand, just focusing on lived experiences, such as those fathers featured in our study, could provide a fairly positive picture of change. However, this picture is skewed as it features men with the necessary resources and the ability to take leave (typically middle-class professionals) and excludes those who are not in that position. The small number of parents who feel able to take SPL indicates limits to the fulfillment of wider equality goals or Giddens' (2008) democratic ideals on a wider scale.

Our findings, therefore, offer glimpses of change, hinting at the transformative potential which SPL can afford families who are able to make the policy work. We lend support to international work, which demonstrates how policies can inform a "slow shift and transformation of gender roles...[as part of a]...larger configuration of ideological institutional change within and across homes, workplaces, and communities" (Doucet & Lee, 2014, p. 362). Despite limitations of the policy itself, we suggest the request and subsequent taking of leave helps open up conversations around work/care, both within the family and workplace.

8 | IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

UK leave provision has come under academic scrutiny (O'Brien & Twamley, 2017), with SPL in particular receiving sharp criticism. Limitations associated with the maternal design of the policy (Twamley & Schober, 2019) and the barriers preventing high numbers of fathers or partners taking leave are highlighted (Birkett & Forbes, 2019). Moss and O'Brien (2019) consider SPL to be a missed opportunity, incapable of breaking down "engrained ideological and political discourses of gendered work–family divisions" (Locke & Yarwood, 2017, p. 7). Our findings support this thinking, with our sample somewhat reflective of the evident barriers associated with the policy (Twamley, 2020). As the policy stands, any widespread impact on the way in which gender relations function in social reproduction is likely to be limited.

In line with previous commentary (e.g., Miller, 2013; Moss & O'Brien, 2019), we argue SPL's current maternal transfer design does not reach far enough to radically unsettle the double work/care burden women face. While employers could increase opportunities for fathers to take SPL (e.g., through enhancements, progressive culture), this is unlikely to significantly improve the diversity of fathers able to take leave.

Our study demonstrates key pronounced periods of leave could help fathers instigate flexible working discussions despite perceptions that flexible working is less available to fathers or granted by employers (Cook et al., 2020; Radcliffe & Cassell, 2015). We should also acknowledge that flexible working is more likely to be available to employees within higher status employment (Cook et al., 2020) who are more likely to meet SPL's eligibility and affordability criteria. Working fathers have been referred to as "ghosts" in the organizational machine (Burnett et al., 2013), yet their growing visibility can make these ghosts more present. Indeed, encouraging men to take leave can help legitimize working fathers and their disruption of gendered work/care practices.

What could be learned from the UK experience? Sweden's parental leave policy explicitly pursues a long-standing commitment to gender equality (Duvander et al., 2017). As with other Nordic schemes, its approach demonstrates a belief in the state's role and commitment to supporting equality in family life (O'Brien, 2009). However, the United Kingdom's SPL (and APL before it) functions as a maternal-transfer scheme on the basis of a long, but poorly rewarded, maternity leave for mothers (Moss & O'Brien, 2019). This kind of model risks further decreasing gender equality (Ray et al., 2010) and firmly positioning women as early caregivers (Gatrell et al., 2015). Given wide criticism of maternal transfer models (Moss & Deven, 2006), countries such as Singapore (which introduced SPL in 2017), should take heed. Well-rewarded individual entitlements are needed to clearly signal support for fathers' role in early infant care. As Koslowski et al. (2019) also note, it is insufficient to rely on gender-neutral language if the goal is gender equality. The authors provide examples of Israel, Poland, and United Kingdom as countries with leave systems that ostensibly provide parents with choice, yet within the context of a maternalistic culture, which inevitably limits the eventual role that fathers play in care.

The “slow drips” illustrated by our participants are unlikely to make wider significant waves, and a more radical approach to family leave is called for to truly unsettle tradition. However, we should acknowledge that such lived experiences do have potential to provide limited impact through the visibility of men as carers and offer scope to partially inform the undoing of gender (Deutsch, 2007) within more local (family and employment) contexts.

9 | LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

It is important to emphasize that our findings report on the experiences of a set of fathers who were not only motivated to take SPL but also met the eligibility criteria (TUC, 2015). Although no data exists regarding the precise profile of men accessing SPL, our sample reflects observations made in prior research. For example studies emphasize the relevance of education, home ownership, ethnicity, and employment in large public/private sector organizations that are more likely to enhance wages (e.g., Birkett & Forbes, 2019; Twamley & Schober, 2019), with O'Brien and Twamley (2017) warning that SPL excludes the growing number of fathers in precarious employment. Future studies could also consider more diverse family types including adoptive and LGBTQ+ parents, as well as exploring experiences across diverse cultural groups.

In the first phase of interviews, we did not specifically set out to explore fathers' return-to-work intentions, although these were discussed with some participants, reflecting the emergent conversational nature of our interviews. With hindsight we recognize this limitation to our data collection, and encourage further study to explore the impact of leave on father's return-to-work intentions and subsequent adjustments. In addition, while we captured the stories of working fathers, given they are seldom considered (Ranson, 2011), we recognize the opportunity to also include partners' voices regarding both the negotiation, and experiences, of SPL. It may be that supplementary methods such as audio diaries or other ethnographic approaches could add nuance to understandings of the dynamic nature of experiences as they unfold. In order to further engage with the complexity of the ways social reproduction is re-configured, a network approach to research design should also include employers' views and practices. Such an approach would recognize transformations in gendered work/care practices require multiple shifts, encompassing not only family relations, but also institutional structures and policies.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared; confidentiality was promised to the interviewees.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Equivalent to SMP—currently £145.18 per week or 90% employee's weekly earnings, whichever is lower.

² Government's technical guide states maternity and SPL schemes can be considered separately (BIS, 2014).

³ SPL months taken.

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