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# Involved fatherhood and the workplace context: A new theoretical approach

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[Correction added on 10 January 2022, after  
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## Abstract

The prevalence of the ideal worker norm and the unwillingness of organizations to acknowledge the transition to fatherhood as a life-changing event are key factors that continue to inhibit men who pursue greater involvement as parents. This article applies fresh theoretical perspectives that influence the situated agency of new fathers in the workplace. It argues that informal structural conditions at organizational level, specifically the organization of working time (materialized by the influence of organizational rhythms) and the difficulty of articulating a caring masculine identity are factors that significantly contribute to the debate on fathers' reluctance to embrace involved fatherhood. Drawing together the issues discussed above, the article presents a conceptual model, which argues for a recursive relationship between fathers' ability to achieve involved fatherhood and these structural conditions in an organizational context. The article concludes by considering the practical implications of the model for fathers and organizations and presenting a research agenda based on the issues raised.

## KEYWORDS

fathers, involved fatherhood, organizational culture, organizations, work-family policies

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

For at least the last 30 years, governments of most developed economies have implemented policies to encourage working fathers to commit greater time and energy to their parental role (OECD, 2011). The benefits of increased paternal involvement at home have been widely acknowledged: children achieve better outcomes socially and educationally; active fathers express greater satisfaction with their lives and tend to be in more stable relationships (del Carmen Heurta et al., 2013). Particularly within European Union countries, this focus on working fathers has also complemented other policy agendas: the promotion of child welfare and gender equality and the need to address the decline in the male breadwinner family model by encouraging a greater number of women into work (Caracciolo di Torella, 2014; Lewis, 2010). An increase in maternal employment has necessitated increased support for working parents, which has resulted in opportunities for new fathers to take parental leave and work more flexibly.

This evolution in policy provision has mirrored the changing public discourse on the nature of fatherhood and fathering practice. Modern fathers are under greater societal pressure to become emotionally as well as practically involved in the lives of their children (O'Brien, 2005; Settersten & Cancel-Tirado, 2010). However the definition of "involved" fatherhood is far from settled. Dermott's explanation (2008, p. 17) sets a high bar: "The idea of men and women as equally involved in both spheres [i.e., paid and domestic work] reflects both the recognition of equal competency and the rejection of the categories of worker and parent as implicitly gendered." Gatrell (2007, p. 362) perhaps sets a more achievable goal in describing fathers who have moved beyond merely playing games or having fun with their children: "paternal involvement post-maternity leave encompassed practical tasks such as feeding, bathing and ferrying to and from nursery." Fathers who take some form of leave in the weeks and months post-birth or adoption, or who work flexibly to accommodate some form of care also demonstrate an intention to achieve an emotional bond with their child. However the expectation that fathers should display more "caring" or "nurturing" characteristics exists alongside the traditional notion of father as breadwinner (Braun et al., 2011), which remains influential to masculine identity (Ladge et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2016). Even new fathers that appear to epitomize caring fatherhood in the early months can slip back into the breadwinning stereotype once the pressures of work resume and the novelty of being a new father begins to recede (Miller, 2011; Williams, 2008).

Whether the shift to a discourse of "involved fatherhood" has resulted in widespread practical changes to fathering practice on the ground is debateable (Miller, 2011). Whilst there are examples of men who have chosen (or been forced through job loss) to reduce or even give up their paid work to care for young children (Doucet, 2006; Holter, 2007), gender and organizational norms generally act as conservative forces. Companies have generally lagged behind policy and societal changes by discouraging or even penalizing new fathers who are committed to a "caring" role (Burnett et al., 2013; Holter, 2007; Reimer, 2015; Tanquerel & Grau-Grau, 2020; Williams et al., 2016). Thus aspirant involved fathers are faced with a dilemma: namely whether to maintain their commitment to the ideal worker norm—which compromises their involvement at home and renders their caring responsibilities invisible at work—or to implicitly or explicitly reject it (Burnett et al., 2013; Tanquerel & Grau-Grau, 2020). Most working fathers, with varying degrees of reluctance, continue to choose the former.

This article will contribute to the existing literature on working fathers and organizations in three ways. Firstly, the introduction of a tripartite categorization of structure facilitates a clearer understanding of the nature of the barriers and opportunities facing working fathers in organizations and their interaction with paternal agency. Secondly, it will analyze two constituent parts of the "cultural schema" element of structure in greater detail: namely the organization of working time and the difficulty of articulating a "caring" masculinity at work. In particular, the article will introduce the concept of rhythms and argue that the rhythms created by the idea of a "standard" working day represent a constraining force for fathers that wish to pursue greater involvement as parents. It will argue that the reluctance of fathers to articulate a "caring" masculinity at work is a factor that inhibits long lasting change at societal level. These sections of the article emphasize the difficulty of resisting established workplace rhythms and hegemonic masculinity. Achieving involved fatherhood involves challenging deeply engrained behaviors and established notions

of fatherhood and masculinity. Thirdly, it will present a conceptual model that moves beyond previous work in that its sole focus is on how elements of organizational structure can work for or against paternal visibility as carers at work.

The article begins by considering existing literature on fathers and the effect of fatherhood on their working lives. It then presents new theoretical perspectives that will surface the formal and informal elements of structure within organizations. The degree to which these elements complement or conflict affects the level of organizational support available to working fathers. The overall hypothesis is that structural conditions at organizational level are complex, fluid and indeterminate. In other words, they are capable of facilitating as well as constraining paternal agency, depending on their alignment within each organization. The possibility of change through paternal agency requires greater emphasis in current debates, as it not only helps to explain the change that has already occurred, but envisages the possibility of change in the future (Deutsch, 2007).

## 2 | WORKING FATHERS AND ORGANIZATIONS: EXTANT LITERATURE

Much of the existing literature on the relationship between working fathers and organizations addresses the following question: to what extent should fathers conform to or contest the ideal worker norm? It is a tacit expectation of organizations that male workers in particular fulfill the ideal of the unencumbered worker with few non-work obligations to distract him (Acker, 1990). Conformity to this norm can result in the maintenance of an outwardly successful working life but can also mask inherent tensions between work and caring roles. Contestation of the ideal worker norm can result in a more effective reconciliation between the two roles but potentially at the expense of working life, where progression can be stalled or where involved fathers can be penalized or marginalized (Holter, 2007).

Several studies have provided typologies or broad groups of working fathers in terms of their relative commitment to paid work vis-à-vis their parenting role (Cooper, 2000; Halrynjo, 2009; Hanlon, 2012; Kaufman, 2013). Tanquerel and Grau-Grau's classification (2020) is the most relevant to the subject matter of this article. They argue for a tripartite classification of working fathers: conformers, borderers and deviants. Conformers place paid work at the center of their lives and fatherhood does nothing to change that commitment. At the other end of the spectrum are deviants - a small but growing group of men. Deviants make their status as new fathers visible at work and practice a caring masculinity. They may, for example, take prolonged time away from work to parent, reduce their working hours or pursue work flexibility through formal arrangements. The group of fathers that sit between conformers and deviants is the "borderer" category. These fathers are more committed to their parenting role than conformers, and experience work-family conflict as a result. However, rather than pursuing strategies which make that conflict visible to colleagues and managers, the borderer group pursue invisible strategies (e.g., practice work flexibility on an informal basis) as they are reluctant to "rock the boat." Ladge et al. (2015, p. 158) make similar findings in a US context. Tanquerel and Grau-Grau (2020) criticize this group for being complicit in perpetuating the status quo of hegemonic masculinity and the ideal worker norm. However, these fathers have the potential to step out of the organizational shadows, if only they felt more confident to pursue visible strategies. If this group was to become more visible at work and thus provide a greater challenge to organizational norms, the concept of involved fatherhood could move into the mainstream of organizational life.

Another strand of the literature in this field considers the organizational barriers that prevent greater involvement of new fathers in their parental role. The overwhelming tenor of these studies is that organizations and organizational culture impede or prevent involved fatherhood (Burnett et al., 2013; Goldstein-Gidoni, 2020; Ladge et al., 2015; Murgia & Poggio, 2013). Burnett et al. (2013) characterized working fathers as "ghosts in the organizational machine," in the sense that the shift to fatherhood is unacknowledged at an organizational level. They argue that even in organizations where company policies appeared to facilitate involved fatherhood, fathers felt discouraged from taking them because of unsympathetic line management and a feeling that flexible working policies were for mothers, not fathers. The latter point is echoed by Tanquerel and Grau-Grau in their study of Spanish fathers (2020, pp. 12–13). However, the picture is not overwhelmingly bleak. In a Finnish context, Kangas and Lamsa (2020) have found signs

that managers are supportive (at least in principle) of paternal work-life balance and can provide active encouragement to new fathers to take parental leave. However they also argue that ideal worker discourses co-exist with these more supportive discourses, resulting in the persistence of gendered parenting norms, with fathers still positioned as the secondary parent (2020, p. 13).

Another relevant point that comes through from these studies is the importance of the line manager as a mediator between working fathers and the wider organization (Burnett et al., 2013; Ladge et al., 2015; Murgia & Poggio, 2013). Whilst unsupportive line management is detrimental to the pursuit of involved fatherhood, Ladge et al. (2015) argue that supportive line management allows involved fathers to maintain their commitment to both their paid work and caring roles. However, this support might be conditional, for example, that flexibility should be reciprocal or that fathers should only take a short period of parental leave (Kangas & Lamsa, 2020).

What extant literature has not done to date is utilize the concept of structure as a counterpoint to the exercise of paternal agency. Breaking down structure will provide a clearer understanding of its constituent parts in an organizational context and enables us to categorize those parts within a coherent framework. Whilst studies have considered individual elements of structure in an ad hoc fashion (e.g., the role of line managers, the importance of organizational culture), the relationship between the various elements of structure has yet to be systematically categorized. A particular focus on the resources available to individual fathers at an organizational level can contribute to the ongoing discussion about fathers' unequal access to resources at a macro level (Hobson & Fahlen, 2009; Javornik & Kurowska, 2017). Inequality of access could be materialized through (lack of) organizational provision of policies that support involved fatherhood or through more intangible means, such as the level of human capital of individual fathers. A further advantage of this categorization is that it is flexible enough to make sense of positive change where it occurs. Elements of structure do not always block change—they can facilitate it provided there is consistency between the various elements.

Research has also underlined the importance of fathers' subjective perceptions of whether the achievement of work-life balance is realistic given their position vis-à-vis their organization. In order to appreciate the situated agency of working fathers, it is important to take account of "the cognitive level of agency" (Hobson & Fahlen, 2009, p. 218). Hobson et al. (2013, p. 59) argue that parental perception and feelings have positive or negative impacts on their capability to achieve their optimum work-life balance. They argue that the framing of societal discourse about parental roles in terms of gender equality helps fathers to pursue involved fatherhood; the reverse is true in countries where fathers are positioned as breadwinners and "secondary" parents.

The argument put forward in this article recognizes the importance of fathers' subjective perceptions but takes it in a different direction. The hypothesis is that cultural norms around masculinity have the capacity to inhibit fathers' sense of agency at work. These norms are clearly evolving and in countries such as the UK, there is greater room for men to diverge from common markers of masculinity (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014; Eisen & Yamashita, 2017). Despite this shift, fathers who might want to articulate their commitment to involved fatherhood could feel reluctant to do so in a public setting such as work. This is because hegemonic masculinity remains the prevalent construction of masculinity that ensures continued male dominance in gender relations (Connell, 2005, p. 77; Miller, 2011). It does not prescribe a single way of articulating masculinity (Eisen & Yamashita, 2017, p. 4). It is rather "a collection of values and beliefs that supports men's superiority and embeds itself within social structures, institutions, and interactions" (Eisen & Yamashita, 2017, p. 4). Traditional representations of masculinity depict men as emotionally distant or stoic, aggressive, driven and independent (Eisen & Yamashita, 2017). By contrast, "the central features of caring masculinities are their rejection of domination and their integration of values of care, such as positive emotion, interdependence, and relationality, into masculine identities" (Elliott, 2016, p. 241).

Hegemonic masculinity maintains an internal hierarchy with other forms of masculinity viewed as subordinate (Connell, 2005, p. 78). Studies have argued that male groups construct alternative forms of masculinity ("hybrid" masculinities) whilst continuing to enjoy the economic and social advantages associated with hegemonic masculinity (Eisen & Yamashita, 2017). By contrast, this article argues that fathers who articulate a caring masculinity at work risk disadvantage by being labeled as a subordinate group and being "othered" (Schwalbe et al., 2000). Arguably this is not

a comfortable position for many fathers, particularly those in male-dominated workplaces. Faced with the possibility of losing the benefits that they have accrued thus far in their careers, fathers generally remain reluctant to articulate, still less endorse, involved fatherhood.

The next section of the article seeks to expand our appreciation of the situation of working fathers within organizations by introducing a tri-partite categorization of structure. This categorization will help researchers in the field more readily identify where opportunities and barriers sit within this framework and, in particular, highlight the interaction between its constituent elements.

### 3 | WORKING FATHERS AND ORGANIZATIONS: A NEW CATEGORIZATION

The theoretical perspective presented here identifies the structural conditions at an organizational level and applies them in a systematic way. Sociologists have long debated the relationship between structural conditions present in society and the capacity of individuals to change these conditions through action, in other words to exercise agency (Giddens, 1979, 1984). How can we identify these conditions and why are they important? As Sewell (1992) points out, the term “structure” eludes definition. We use the term in order to explain and analyze enduring patterns in social relations, “even when actors engaging in the relations are unaware of the patterns or do not desire their reproduction” (Sewell, 1992, p. 3). Structuralists argue that structures are essentially determinative of social relations, leaving little or no room for the practice of agency. By contrast, this article will take the view that as agents, humans - and specifically new fathers - can achieve structural change. This ontological position is influenced by Giddens' theory of the duality of structure (1979, 1984). In particular, Giddens argues that structures are capable of both constraining and enabling human action, because in essence, structures are mutable (Giddens, 1993). This is because structures are “both the medium and the outcome of practices which constitute the social system” (Giddens, 1981, p. 27). The interaction between structure and agents who reflexively monitor their actions in order to evaluate their success can result in the constant reproduction - and even transformation - of those structures.

Toyoki et al. (2006), building on the work of Giddens (1977, 1979, 1984) and Sewell (1992), identify three elements of social structure. Firstly there are human and non-human *resources* (e.g., animate or inanimate objects or human qualities such strength and knowledge) “that can be used to enhance or maintain power” (Sewell, 1992, p. 9). Secondly, there are *cultural schemas*, which Sewell describes as: “generalizable or transposable procedures applied in the enactment of social life” (1992, p. 17). For Sewell, cultural schemas are “...society's fundamental tools of thought, but also the various conventions, recipes, scenarios, principles of action, and habits of speech and gesture built up with these fundamental tools” (Sewell, 1992, p. 8). Toyoki et al. (2006) add a third element of structure: *governance regimes*. These are “institutionalized sets of recurring and systematic connections between social roles - especially those found in organizational hierarchies” (Rowe, 2015, p. 108). For the purposes of this article, the governance regime of an organization involves anyone that has management responsibility. This element of structure involves the formal and tangible exercise of power. The cultural schema of an organization comprises informal and invisible characteristics of an organization that might shape or restrict the agency of involved fathers, for example, aspects of working culture or the organization of working hours. The latter might be reflected in contractual terms or might conflict with them. These characteristics might be equally as powerful as the governance regime of an organization. (Perhaps even more so because their origin and development tend to be elusive.) It should not be assumed that the governance regime and cultural schema of organizations will complement each other. There may be tension or even contradiction between them. As discussed below, fathers' agency to pursue involved fatherhood will be influenced by the extent to which these two elements of structure align. Finally, resources available to new fathers might include contractual rights that allow them to take a period of well-paid parental leave or their own valued status within an organization. Equally, they might have an unsympathetic line manager who refuses a request for flexible working hours or more time working from home. In summary, the resources available to fathers might support or undermine their ability to achieve greater parental involvement.

It is important to note that each element of structure is widely defined and consequently there is no strict separation between the constituent elements. Being part of one element does not preclude someone (or something) from being part of another. For example, line managers are clearly part of the governance regime of organizations, but they are also a resource which can be used by involved fathers to enhance the latter's own knowledge or position within that organization. This tri-partite categorization of structure is useful as it includes both formal and informal elements of structure within organizations (Haas & Hwang, 2007). It also recognizes that the relationship between structure and agency—the relationship between organizations and working fathers - frequently involves asserting and resisting power.

### 3.1 | Governance regime

Although beyond the focus of this article, clearly there are conditions in this structural layer that exist at national and supra-national level. The most obvious are the prevailing national and international economic context and the availability of statutory rights at national level. Clearly these factors will vary internationally (Hobson & Fahlen, 2009). In organizational contexts, the governance regime is most clearly materialized in the form of company directors, owner-managers or forms of executive management. Individual employees may also report to a line manager. The crucial role of line managers in facilitating or blocking fathers who seek greater involvement has been discussed already. Fathers can be subject to institutional pressures from directors/owners or line managers that might undermine their pursuit of involved fatherhood. For example, working fathers are less likely to claim rights if they feel that doing so might put them or their managers/colleagues in a difficult position or if they are experiencing job insecurity or upheaval within their organizations (McKee et al., 2000, p. 565). Exploitative working patterns might render involved fatherhood almost impossible (Trades Union Congress, 2017). Working fathers in these contexts will find it more difficult to exercise agency to effect change.

Equally, governance regimes at organizational level can facilitate involved fatherhood by encouraging take up of periods of parental leave or other work-family rights. This can arise as a result of a variety of corporate agendas. Neo-institutional theory argues that companies seek to maintain their institutional legitimacy (both for the people who work for them and their customers or clients) as well as their competitiveness (Powell & Di Maggio, 1991). Companies make considerable efforts to market themselves as family friendly employers in order to appeal to prospective employees and to create a distinctive organizational identity. HR-informed agendas and the need to increase employee retention and reduce absenteeism creates commercial pressure to embrace measures that facilitate employee well-being and in particular, work-life reconciliation (Garg & Agrawal, 2020). Pressure from trade unions - particularly in the public sector and utility companies—might produce the same result. Organizations are also forced to change their internal procedures as a response to external pressures such as government legislation. However as will be argued below, in order to implement durable change, there needs to be consistency between the formal structural elements (such as the consistent implementation of company policies by line managers), and informal elements, such as working practices.

### 3.2 | Cultural schema

The focus of this layer of structure is the (frequently silent) influence of informal working practices or culture within organizations, that commonly exist in tension with the discourse of involved fatherhood (Martin, 2002; Reimer, 2019; Schein, 2017). Norms around the traditional division of parental roles at a societal level are frequently reproduced at an organizational level (Burnett et al., 2013; Lewis, 1997), that is, organizational assumptions that women rather than men tend to work flexibly to facilitate childcare, that fathers usually do not take long periods of leave from work to

be primary carers. Working fathers seeking to be more involved as parents can present a challenge to these norms (Neumann & Meuser, 2017).

Working practices are another aspect of cultural schema. They can complement or contradict the governance regime. Liebig and Oechsle (2017) note the conflicted position of many organizations, which seek to maximize employee performance whilst being concerned for their well-being (or at least appearing to do so). Statutory rights are part of the governance regime of an organization and in principle, are available for employees to take up. However there can be tension or even contradiction between working practices and these “paper” policies (Tanquerel & Grau-Grau, 2020): for example, long working hours might be seen as normal, employees might be permitted to work flexibly but at the expense of their career progression or shift patterns may involve evening or weekend work (Callan, 2007; Holter, 2007). If that is the case, take up of paternity or other father-specific leave is likely to remain low even if it is available in theory.

It should also be noted that organizational culture is not monolithic (Alvesson, 2013; Martin & Siehl, 1983). Particularly in organizations where power is decentralized, counter-cultures can develop that seek to undermine the dominant culture and/or present an alternative set of values (Martin & Siehl, 1983, p. 54). Thus even in organizations where structural conditions are supportive, the implementation of that policy may be met with resistance from line managers. Conversely, in organizations that appear to be unfavorable to aspirant involved fathers, there may be opportunity for subversion. However in the latter context, agreements regarding (e.g.,) job role or working hours are more likely to be ad hoc and individualized, thus limiting the potential for more wide-ranging change throughout the organization.

### 3.3 | Resources

The emphasis on the significance of resources for fathers at an organizational level highlights fathers' unequal access to resources, depending on variables such as the identity of their employer and their position within the organization. Resources can be animate or inanimate. The human resources that can be appropriated by working fathers consists of two categories—people within and outside the organization. Directors, HR personnel and line managers are human resources that can be utilized by fathers to achieve flexible working or take parental leave. However, the former are also part of the governance regime of organizations and therefore may feel constrained by the content of written policies or the workplace culture of the organization. The explicit or tacit support of colleagues is also significant, as they may be directly affected by a working father deciding to compress or reduce their working hours. As already noted, the situation of fathers within organizations varies greatly and will influence their willingness and ability to effect change. Highly skilled employees, those who are valued highly or who are long serving employees would appear to be in a strong position to access rights. These are resources that working fathers can draw on to support their requests. A fundamental point is that resources are neutral, that is, they can be appropriated to serve any purpose. Thus even in organizations that are not generally amenable to fathers taking advantage of work-life reconciliation measures, if fathers can appropriate relevant resources, they may be able to negotiate a solution on an individual basis (Holter, 2007, p. 438). These are only tentative conclusions based on existing empirical research—more work is required to explore the link between access to resources and its effect on paternal ability to achieve involved fatherhood.

The table below also gives examples of non-human resources that may be available to individual fathers. Formal documents are clearly resources that can be harnessed to facilitate involved fatherhood, for example, some working fathers might have contractual rights to flexible working or leave entitlements that are more generous than statutory rights. Other organizations choose not to “gold plate” statutory rights, which may make it difficult for many fathers to take leave. The level of financial support available to fathers who want to take parental leave links governance regimes (be it national governments or directors at organizational level) with available resources.



An important contribution of the tri-partite categorization of structure presented here is that it takes account of resources outside as well as inside work, for example, whether their partner is employed or access to childcare. These factors clearly influence fathers' ability to pursue involved fatherhood, yet the literature referred to above has tended to overlook them. For example, access to affordable childcare and/or alternative support network would be a necessity for single fathers. Availability and cost of childcare links resources with the layer of governance regime, as there is huge diversity in state support at national level (Yerkes & Javornik, 2018). Having a spouse or partner who also works increases the financial resources available to fathers. The three elements of structure can interact in a complementary or contradictory manner.

The above discussion can be summarized in the table below (Table 1).

In summary, aspiring involved fathers must operate within and negotiate with several types of structure that exist at societal/cultural, policy/governmental and organizational levels (Brandth & Kvande, 2002; Williams, 2008). This tri-partite categorization of structure presented above is useful as it enables a distinction to be made between types of structure that are *visible* and *formal* (the governance regime and the resources appropriated by it) and those that are *invisible* and *informal* (cultural schema). Thus it recognizes the complexity of organizational structure as well as enabling us to observe the interaction between the different elements. If the involved fatherhood agenda is to become more influential within organizations, fathers will need to engage more confidently with the visible and formal aspects of structure. In essence, fathers must move from the borderer to the deviant group in order to bring about durable organizational change (Tanquerel & Grau-Grau, 2020).

The emphasis on structure is not to deny that fathers are incapable of exercising agency, but their agency must operate within these structural contexts. These structural forms can facilitate or constrain paternal agency, privilege or discourage fathers seeking to utilize statutory or contractual rights. Their ability to do so depends not only on the structural conditions at organizational level, but on their ability to access the resources that will facilitate the transition to involved fatherhood. If they can do so, there will be "windows of opportunity for resourceful actors" to bring about change (von Alemann et al., 2017, p. 25).

TABLE 1 The tri-partite categorization of structure applied to the organizational context

Structural element (after Toyoki et al., 2006)	Application to working fathers
Governance regime – exercise of power in a formal way	National/international economic context Statutory rights (national level) Organizational hierarchy e.g. directors, line managers
Cultural schemas – norms that can shape behavior or choices	Societal norms regarding parenting roles Working practices e.g. long hours or working patterns unconducive to involved fatherhood, flexible working. Rhythms created by working practices
Resources – can support or help to transform governance regimes/cultural schemas	Work-related: Directors, HR personnel, line managers, colleagues Contractual benefits or other rights Human capital of individual workers within an organization, for example, role, status, seniority, length of service. Outside work: Income Presence of partner, employment status of partner Access to childcare Access to local support network

## 4 | ORGANIZATIONAL AND PATERNAL RHYTHMS

This section of the article elaborates on a particular aspect of the cultural schema (workplace norms) described above, namely the organization of working time. As the concept of rhythms may be unfamiliar and clearly involves a novel perspective on the organization of working time, it necessitates a separate section to fully consider the ideas and their application.

The influence of the “normal” working day (and the link to notions of productivity and the ideal worker norm) remains substantial in organizational life. Whilst flexible working for mothers with young children has gained widespread acceptance from an organizational perspective (Burnett et al., 2013), fathers generally are still expected to complete a full-time job within a standard working week. The article argues that the notion of the “standard” working day is powerfully engrained in organizational culture as well as individual behavior. Thus working time is both a structural issue that can block change at organizational level, but also an agential issue that involves individual choices about whether and how far to conform.

The article will use the concept of rhythms, which originated from the French Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre, to explain how the organization of working time presents a challenge to aspirant involved fathers. Lefebvre (2004) explored the prevalence and nature of rhythms (both natural and artificial) and their impact on individuals and communities. “Everywhere where [sic] there is interaction between a place, a time and an expenditure of energy, there is rhythm” (2004, p. 15). Rhythms are described as “a cyclic yet changing dynamic” (Toyoki et al., 2006, p. 108) which agents experience as “recurrent cycles in behavior” (Warner, 1988, p. 64). However Lefebvre emphasizes that rhythms never repeat themselves identically and indefinitely: they are in constant flux (2004, p. 6). There can be times of crisis where existing rhythms break down and new ones are established (2004, p. 44). He identifies the primary importance of *cyclical* and *linear* rhythms (2004, p. 8). Cyclical rhythms can be observed in the natural world (diurnal, seasonal, tidal) but also in the human (birth, death). Linear rhythms are artificial, in other words they originate from our social practice as humans rather than nature. Linear rhythms delineate the working day from the rest of the day, for example, commuting and recurrent working patterns. In addition, workplaces develop their own practices that establish themselves on a recurrent basis. These two types of rhythm, according to Lefebvre, co-exist but are in constant struggle or “antagonistic unity” (2004, p. 8). As discussed in more detail below, this antagonism is never more apparent than when employees become new parents.

Also important in our context is the idea of “dressage” (2004, pp. 38–45). Dressage, Lefebvre argues, is the process by which individuals are subconsciously “trained” to conform to the regular rhythms of daily life. The concept of rhythms has particular resonance in terms of the interaction between work and family life. Particularly important in our context is the relationship between the (linear) rhythms of working life and the (cyclical) rhythms of birth. These latter rhythms give rise to caring commitments that can conflict or exist in tension with paid work. However, the rhythm of the “normal” working day takes no account of such commitments and the rhythms that these produce. For example, parents with young children are usually expected to maintain “normal” working hours despite the fact that the “school” day is shorter than the working day. The same argument applies for school holidays.

Toyoki et al. (2006) take Lefebvre's work further by arguing that rhythms possess temporal qualities. They manifest themselves as three types: *routine rhythms*, which tend to be oriented toward the past and reproduce established patterns of behavior; *practical rhythms*, which predominate when new situations emerge in the present and routine rhythms need to be adapted; and *projected rhythms*, which are future-oriented as agents attempt to anticipate changes in the future by imagining what might occur. One type of rhythm might predominate in any given situation, but that might change quickly if circumstances alter. Thus from the perspective of a worker, a working day might have elements of routine rhythm (e.g., having a lunch break) but might also have elements of practical rhythms (familiarizing oneself with a new project or a new piece of software). The aggregate of these rhythms (cyclical and linear, corporeal and social etc.) co-exist: this is termed “polyrhythmia” by Lefebvre (2004, p. 16). Whether actors experience polyrhythmia as harmonious (eurhythmia) or conflicting (arrhythmia) depends on the rhythmic circumstances that actors

find themselves in and how they exercise agency to adapt. The next section will explore how these different types of rhythm specifically apply to working fathers.

Groups of people, as well as individuals, establish their own rhythms (2004, pp. 42–43). Rhythms can be mobilized at a local or societal level, for example in the form of annual occasions such as fetes and other celebrations. Lefebvre also argued that quantifiable “clock” time is hegemonic in modern society because it has been appropriated by the forces of capital. Organizations measure many aspects of working lives as a proxy for productivity, for example, clocking “on” and “off” or completion of timesheets. Thus measured time reinforces the predominance of working rhythms in daily life: all other types of rhythm are subordinate to it (2004, p. 74). As workers, we become familiar with the routine rhythms of our working lives to such an extent that they become engrained. This is the case for organizations as much as employees. It becomes difficult for executive or line managers to accept ways of working (particularly for men) that challenge the routine rhythms within their particular organization. There is a clear overlap with the concept of cultural schema discussed above - namely that work is generally undertaken within “normal” working hours, with its clear separation of domestic and work rhythms. So, for example, to change working patterns to accommodate paternity (as opposed to maternity) feels unfamiliar and novel to organizations that operate within these rhythmic constraints. Managers may also be concerned that if they agree to flexible working hours for one employee, then others will demand the same, thus triggering a “domino” effect. These ideas will be revisited later in the article.

The concept of rhythms can illuminate not only the constrained way in which work is organized but the conflicted position of new parents, who are expected to manage the arrhythmia created by working and caring responsibilities. Prior to the birth of a baby, work and domestic rhythms are likely to co-exist more or less harmoniously, because parents have established routine rhythms. However, the birth immediately produces an increase in the strength of domestic rhythms. It is this period immediately post-birth where the cyclical rhythms of the female body most clearly conflict with the linear rhythms of work. This conflict produces a sense of arrhythmia, not just in mothers but fathers too. This can be dissipated during the parental leave period, but it will quickly return when fathers return to work.

In this post-birth period, perhaps with the exception of a week or two away from work, fathers are expected to maintain their normal working rhythms. Despite domestic rhythms being at their most demanding, employers typically expect fathers to continue their working lives with little or no acknowledgment of this change (Burnett et al., 2013). Governance regimes, in the form of legal rights at national level, generally reinforce this expectation by way of shorter leave provision for fathers. Thus fathers have fewer resources at their disposal to pursue greater involvement as parents. Through the pervasive influence of cultural schema in many societies (with a few exceptions), men are expected to continue to work normally despite becoming new fathers. Fathers who want to take a period of leave to be primary carers or to reduce their working hours to facilitate their caring role are still viewed as atypical, because they are challenging well-established cultural schema and routine work rhythms. Through the process of dressage, these working rhythms have become engrained at both individual and organizational level. It is the path of least resistance to carry on as normal, that is, to continue full-time work post-birth. However, Lefebvre himself acknowledged that the power of rhythms is not immutable. This article argues that if working fathers are to become more visible as carers in the workplace, they must become “rhythm disruptors.” In other words, they must be prepared to challenge conventional notions of working time more explicitly by seeking greater flexibility to their working hours (and perhaps place of work) on a formal basis. Informal and ad hoc requests will perpetuate paternal invisibility and fail to challenge the hegemony of the 9 to 5 working day.

## 5 | FATHERHOOD AND MASCULINE IDENTITY AT WORK

The third section continues the underlying theme of the article, namely identifying and analyzing the structural context that faces aspirant involved fathers at work.

Humberd et al. (2015) find that working fathers must navigate several different (and arguably conflicting) identities associated with fatherhood simultaneously. They identify the four most common types of paternal identity as:

provider, role model, partner and nurturer. (The “nurturer” image is the most closely aligned to the involved fatherhood ideal.) Aspirant involved fathers are faced with the task of balancing the ideal of involved fatherhood alongside the traditional image of father as provider. However, the latter remains key to paternal identity - even amongst the white-collar participants in Humberd's study. Humberd et al. (2015) find that of the four types referred to above, the participants least commonly articulated the nurturer image. This is not a surprising finding given that the nurturing identity is culturally the least well-established of these identities. However, the study did not specifically ask participants whether they manifested a caring masculine identity at work and the difficulties associated with doing so. This study suggests that whilst multiple paternal identities currently co-exist, fathers feel that they are expected to maintain an absolute commitment to work and do not feel that it is legitimate to acknowledge that they feel conflicted by their parental role whilst at work. Thus their sense of agency is limited.

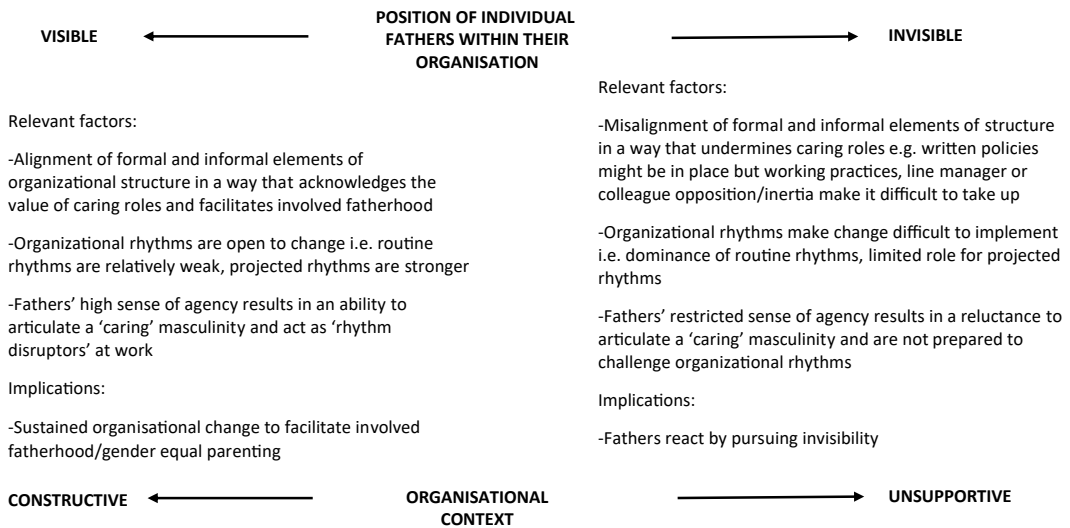
Are aspirant involved fathers reluctant to reveal commitment to their caring role in a work setting because they feel that it will compromise their masculine identity? The notion of “caring” masculinity is asserting greater influence on the wider topic of masculine identity (Elliott, 2016; Miller, 2011; Scambor et al., 2013). However, these studies do not specifically consider the difficulty of articulating a caring masculinity at work, namely in interactions with managers and colleagues. There can be explicit or implicit pressure on men to conform to these stereotypical characteristics at work as well as outside of work (Bird, 1996). Therefore the expectation that men conform to a certain type of masculinity in the workplace—namely enacting normative markers of masculinity—can render the articulation of a caring masculine identity problematic.

The ability of workers to downplay or conceal aspects of their identity at work has been discussed in other contexts. Tyler and Cohen (2010) describe how women presented a “version” of themselves at work that they feel will be consistent with organizational norms and considered “acceptable” by colleagues. The same could apply to aspirant involved fathers, who might view the articulation of a caring masculinity as out of step with organizational and cultural norms. Consequently, they might feel the need to downplay or disguise the extent to which their role as parent is central to their identity in order to retain the ability to articulate masculine identity in a normative way. Particularly when combined with organizational rhythms that discourage active fatherhood, this might go some way to explaining the reluctance of many fathers to work flexibly on a formal basis or take extended parental leave (Burnett et al., 2013; Miller, 2011; Tracy & Rivera, 2009).

This silent pressure to conform to established notions of hegemonic masculinity can form part of the cultural schema of organizations. The difficulty of disrupting or resisting established workplace rhythms and hegemonic masculinity can restrict the agency of aspirant involved fathers. Workplace rhythms and hegemonic masculinity are both external and internal barriers to fathers. They are external in the sense that they can be defining characteristics of cultural schemas (i.e., workplace cultures) that fathers feel pressurized to conform to. However, articulating a caring masculinity can also involve fathers challenging their subjective perceptions about what it means to be a father and a man. Hegemonic masculinity uses these “taken-for-granted” characteristics to prescribe and limit acceptable markers of masculinity. To articulate an alternative iteration demands that fathers change their self-perception as well as challenge these external features of the workplace.

## 6 | A NEW CONCEPTUAL MODEL: MAPPING THE ABILITY OF FATHERS TO ACHIEVE INVOLVED FATHERHOOD

The model in Figure 1 draws together the various theoretical strands discussed in the article. It situates fathers' position in their organizations along a spectrum, from visible at one end to invisible at the other. It also positions organizational support for working fathers on a spectrum. The contribution to extant literature is that the model brings together theoretical perspectives from other fields because they provide a novel insight into the organizational barriers facing fathers who seek to achieve involved fatherhood. Studies that have contributed conceptual models (either in terms of fathers' potential to achieve a more effective work-family balance or their use of parental leave)



**FIGURE 1** The conceptual model

have acknowledged the importance of the organizational context, but only as one factor among others (Adler & Lenz, 2017; Deven, 2005; Hobson & Fahlen, 2009). The model presented in this article is more granular as its sole focus is on the interaction between fathers and their organizational context. It also moves beyond previous models in that it argues for a *recursive* interaction between paternal agency and the organizational context. In particular, the alignment of the formal and informal elements of structure is much more likely to produce a supportive environment for working fathers to pursue an involved parenting role. In other words, there is consistency in the implementation of company policies between executive and line management (the governance regime) and this consistency is not undermined by unwritten rules (cultural schema) such as the need to work long hours. In addition, there are resources in place that support involved fatherhood. The model allows for a dynamic rather than a deterministic relationship between structural and agential contexts. The model also emphasizes the crucial role of agency in achieving greater paternal visibility.

The commentary provided in the model concentrates on the extreme ends of the spectrum, but the intention behind the model is not to categorize fathers as simply visible or invisible, and organizations as constructive or unsupportive. The diversity of organizational forms and the presence of contradictory discourses on this issue within many organizations precludes such a dualistic approach (Kangas & Lamsa, 2020, p. 15; Murgia & Poggio, 2013). Both fathers and organizations are likely to be positioned somewhere between these extremes. There is likely to be a recursive relationship between fathers and organizations, that is, a supportive organizational context results in greater paternal confidence to pursue involved fatherhood. The model also provides the flexibility to accommodate alternative scenarios, for example, visible fathers within an unsupportive organization. In pursuance of gender equality agenda, the goal is to move new fathers toward greater visibility and organizations to greater provision of support for them.

What are the factors that contribute to a supportive organizational context for new fathers? There is alignment or congruence of the formal aspects of organizational structure (namely executive management, line management and written policies) and the informal (organizational culture and working practices). This enables organizations to move beyond individualized solutions (which can create inequality between employees in the same organization) to an organization-wide approach (Holter, 2007; Kangas & Lamsa, 2020). Organizational rhythms are also conducive to new fathers; namely organizations where routine rhythms are relatively weak and projected rhythms are influential. Another possible explanation is that these types of organizations are simply more comfortable with the prospect of

managing a polyrhythmic situation, that is, managers and employees are given autonomy which can result in multiple work-related rhythms within the same organization.

It is possible for fathers to experience work and domestic rhythms as less arrhythmic, if both they and their managers display rhythm intelligence (Rouse et al., 2021). Rhythm intelligence is the ability to appreciate that, especially for new fathers, organizational and domestic rhythms have the potential to clash, resulting in a sense of arrhythmia for both parties. Both parties must employ agency to create solutions that attempt to reduce such arrhythmia. In arguing for the importance of rhythm intelligence, the author diverges from Lefebvre's view of capitalism as a wholly exploitative and destructive force (2004, pp. 53–55). The premise of rhythm intelligence is that managers can demonstrate an understanding of the arrhythmic situation in which working fathers might find themselves and are willing to consider mutually acceptable solutions. It is all too easy for routine rhythms and established cultural schema to predominate in the workplace. Established working practices can become engrained regardless of their efficacy. But rhythmically intelligent employees and managers look beyond the present and are prepared to implement change to benefit both worker and organization.

In negotiating these solutions, fathers should recognize that managers have a responsibility to make organizations financially and practically viable, such that any agreement reached must be workable. Thus any request to take parental leave or work flexibly should be tailored to the context of the team or department in which fathers work. Clearly the ability of managers to display rhythm intelligence might be enabled or constrained by the governance regime and/or cultural schema of the organization. However rhythmically intelligent management has the potential to undo the gendered perception that taking leave and working flexibly are predominantly maternal rights. However, it can only be an influential idea if organizations acknowledge that becoming a father is “a major life transition similar to motherhood” (Adler & Lenz, 2017, p. 245).

These organizations are open to “doing things differently” and will be more comfortable with implementing change to support involved fatherhood, for example, non-standard working patterns. Working fathers are clearly wary of the potentially adverse consequences of taking up flexible working (Reimer, 2019; Tanquerel & Grau-Grau, 2020); so there must be no career penalties for those that take it up. The importance of role models has also been demonstrated (Kangas & Lamsa, 2020), so that employees with management responsibilities should also be encouraged to participate. It may be easier to implement changes of this nature in smaller companies or companies with a flat management structure than in organizations with a hierarchical or bureaucratic structure. These structural elements will complement and encourage paternal agency: fathers will feel that it is legitimate to articulate a nurturing paternal identity and to pursue working hours or other conditions that would facilitate involved fatherhood.

At the other end of the spectrum are fathers with a restricted sense of agency working for unsupportive organizations. From the organizational perspective, the relationship between the formal and informal elements of structure mean that fathers' caring role is unacknowledged. Alternatively, although it may be formally acknowledged (e.g., in written policies), informal and invisible cultural schema such as well-established workplace rhythms could restrict opportunities to utilize work-family rights such as flexible working hours. In such organizations, routine rhythms can predominate. Thus organizational change is slow to occur. This is perhaps explained by a lack of strategic vision regarding new working practices and/or assessment of productivity at executive management level. To put it in rhythmic terms, projected organizational rhythms are weak; there is a reluctance to anticipate or embrace change. There may also be a reluctance to embrace the polyrhythmic situation described above. As a reaction to this, fathers are more likely to pursue a policy of invisibility (Tanquerel & Grau-Grau, 2020). For example, in workplaces where men are implicitly expected to enact normative markers of masculinity, they may be reluctant to articulate a caring masculinity. Again, there appears to be a recursive relationship between agential and structural factors in this scenario. In other words, fathers' restricted sense of agency and the unsupportive organizational context are mutually reinforcing.

## 7 | CONCLUSION

The new theoretical perspectives presented in this article provide a sociologically informed categorization of the structural context in which aspirant involved fathers in developed economies must navigate at work. This approach argues that a tri-partite categorization of structure provides a fresh insight into the complexity of organizational structure and the relationship between its formal and informal elements. Extant literature has noted the significance of various aspects of organizational structure such as line management and working culture as potential barriers (Burnett et al., 2013; Humberd et al., 2015; Kangas & Lamsa, 2020). These elements can now be placed within a coherent framework of organizational structure to more effectively analyze the interaction between them. This interaction can be mutually reinforcing or contradictory. The alignment of elements can facilitate or block involved fatherhood depending on the organizational context. Misalignment may still allow room for fathers to exercise agency, but usually in a more improvised and individualized way. The article has highlighted the significance of the resources that may or may not be available to fathers (both inside and outside organizations). This provides a framework for the ongoing debate about inequality of access for fathers, both at policy and organizational level. The article also argues that the predominance of routine rhythms and pressure to enact normative markers of masculinity in workplaces can make it more difficult for fathers to articulate the terminology of caring masculinity as well as gain access to work-family rights. However, it also proposes that these structural elements are mutable. Thus fathers (particularly those with high human capital) have opportunities to drive organizational change regardless of the structural context in which they find themselves. This approach can help to explain why organizational change is taking place and predict change in the future. Change is much more likely to be achieved when fathers with a high sense of agency are in a context that either supports change within the organization as a whole or accommodates piecemeal change for particularly valued workers (Kangas & Lamsa, 2020; Liebig & Kron, 2017). Conversely, change is less likely when routine working rhythms and a high level of employer control over working time result in rigid organizational structures.

What are the practical implications of this model for fathers and organizations? Recommendations will concentrate firstly on what actions fathers can take to produce change in their organizations. Fathers who are pursuing visibility in unsupportive organizations need to use their influence to call for more wide-ranging organizational change. This can be achieved by arguing for greater availability of flexible working and the implementation of parental leave policies that might be available on paper but are difficult to take up in reality. If they are able to do so, they should model the kinds of behavior that they would want to see implemented across their organizations. In other words, they should act as “rhythm disruptors” by requesting flexible working hours (if possible) to spend more time with their child. They could also encourage their colleagues to follow their lead.

Organizations that want to support new fathers should recognize that expecting fathers to take the initiative is often insufficient to produce change. Supportive policies should not only be promoted, but fathers with management responsibilities should encourage colleagues to take them up and act as role models. Line managers must be encouraged to support new fathers and company policies must be implemented consistently across organizations. Real or anticipated opposition from co-workers has also been identified as a factor that has stopped fathers from taking up work-life balance policies (Burnett et al., 2013). Workers who do not have parental or caring commitments should not be penalized by colleagues who decide to work flexibly. Particularly in situations where fathers want to reduce their working hours, their responsibilities should be reduced accordingly but without placing excessive burdens on their colleagues. Thus managers must be prepared to think more creatively about job design and/or argue the case for hiring more workers. Fathers should also be supported to articulate a caring masculinity at work and not to feel that they must conform to a normative iteration of masculinity.

The possibility of change has been argued for throughout this article. Widespread change can only come about if organizations acknowledge that some fathers want to make changes to the way they work (or place limits on the amount of time they work) in order to accommodate involved fatherhood. Importantly, this acknowledgment can produce organizational benefits as well as helping fathers themselves. This scenario opens the possibility that organizations, as well as individual fathers, can implement changes to working practices to support involved fatherhood.

Organizations need to recognize the constraining power of routine working rhythms not just for working mothers but also for fathers and be more willing to consider different ways of working that move away from the full-time, 9 to 5 model. Pursuing a rhythmically intelligent approach will enable organizations to think more radically about how work and working time is organized.

The theoretical perspectives presented here can form the basis of future empirical work into how the transition to fatherhood affects men's working lives. The argument that the provision of organizational support for involved fatherhood produces greater visibility among involved fathers (and the converse situation) needs to be tested. Does company size, management structure or gender composition of the workforce affect the power of structural barriers (including rhythms and normative enactment of masculine identity) within organizations and the consistency with which changes to support involved fatherhood can be implemented? In order to test the arguments put forward here, empirical work is needed to investigate the experiences of men (and fathers in particular) who have articulated or enacted caring masculinity at work. Could greater organizational and paternal appreciation of the nature of rhythms in working and domestic life (and the arrhythmia that can arise when they clash) result in initiatives that would reduce the predominance of workplace norms around the organization of the working day? For example, could more workplaces consider a move to employees working "core" hours, with a choice about whether they complete the rest of their working time at the start or end of the day? Could new fathers be given the option of a temporary reduction in hours (whilst remaining on full pay) to support them during the first year? Workplace rhythms are not just confined to explicit or implicit norms around working hours—they can be established in any area of working life, for example, regularity of meetings or breaks, how employees account for their time, how work is documented, how change is implemented. Any of these rhythms may be (or become) inefficient and therefore unnecessarily prolong the working day, resulting in employees not having as much time to devote to their parenting role.

The necessity of working fathers becoming more involved as parents has achieved widespread acceptance at policy level. However tangible change to the gendered division of parental roles has been slow and uneven internationally. This article has argued that fresh theoretical perspectives provide a more coherent understanding of the barriers that face working fathers, as well as opportunities for implementation of organizational change. This perspective could provide the framework for a wide-ranging evaluation of how work and working time is perceived in the future.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

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