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Reconciling the ideal worker norm and involved fatherhood: new fathers' experiences of requesting Shared Parental Leave in UK organizations

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ABSTRACT

The introduction of Shared Parental Leave (SPL) in the UK provided an opportunity for more fathers to take time out of work to be primary carers. The article presents the findings from qualitative interviews carried out with ten British fathers, which analyses their experiences of requesting SPL and the level of organizational support available to them on taking leave. In terms of requesting SPL and on their return to work, two approaches are discernible: these are described as 'cautious' and 'bold'. Although maintaining their commitment to being involved parents, cautious fathers tended to conform to the ideal worker norm. They did so by adopting strategies to mitigate any anticipated career penalty, which included adjusting the timing and length of their leave. Thus the values associated with the ideal worker norm represent a psychological barrier to fathers who might otherwise want to take a longer period of leave or adjust their working hours post-leave. By contrast, bold fathers are less concerned about accommodating their employer's needs in requesting SPL and are prepared to adjust their working hours to facilitate involved fatherhood. The article concludes by considering appropriate responses for policymakers, fathers and organizations.

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1. Introduction

In recent years the UK government has increased its policy provision for new fathers who want to take a period of parental leave to care for their child. The UK sits within the liberal welfare system (Esping-Andersen, 1990), where parental leave provision is available but there is limited state-funded financial assistance whilst on leave and limited help with childcare costs until children reach three years old. Shared Parental Leave (SPL) was introduced in 2015 to supplement maternity and paternity leave. SPL enables parents to share up to 50 weeks of leave during the first year, however the rate of pay available whilst on leave is so low as to make it unaffordable for most British parents (Moran & Koslowski,

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2019). Further detail on provision for parental leave is provided in the third section of the article.

One of the UK government's objectives for introducing SPL was to promote greater gender equal parenting by encouraging fathers to take more leave: the government consultation document extolled the benefits to children and fathers of early paternal involvement in caring (BIS, 2011, p. 5). Fathers' involvement in childcare contributes to improved cognitive development in children as well as reducing behavioural and emotional problems (Government Equalities Office, 2021). These objectives have been frustrated by a low take up rate for SPL – only 5% of eligible fathers have taken it (BEIS, 2023). Despite this, there is evidence that gendered parenting norms in the UK are changing, with some fathers willing to be primary caregivers in the first year post-birth (Banister & Kerrane, 2022). However, as Banister and Kerrane note (2022, p. 12), only a small number of (professional) fathers can realistically take SPL in its current form. In other words, those who have the knowledge that SPL is available, who can navigate the complicated request process and have the resources available to manage financially during the leave period.

From one perspective, the process of requesting SPL should be unremarkable in that it is a legal right for fathers who meet the eligibility criteria. Yet organizations are more than mere conduits that simply process requests for leave. They are active participants in the work-family arena and can promote or impede access to work-family rights (van Breeschoten, 2019). In particular, norms that originate in workplace culture – for example, the expectation that employees work beyond their contractual hours and are always available for clients or customers – can influence fathers' behaviour. They might feel constrained or judged when requesting leave or flexible working to facilitate greater involvement as parents. This can lead to fathers not exercising their rights at all or not exercising them to the full, which can ultimately contribute to the perpetuation of gendered parenting norms (Haas & Hwang, 2019; Närvi & Salmi, 2019; Petts et al., 2022).

In particular, professional fathers who want to take SPL face competing personal pressures: their desire to maintain the ideal worker norm on one hand and their desire to be involved fathers on the other. The ideal worker norm demands that workers, and particularly professional workers, demonstrate a single-minded commitment to getting the job done, to the exclusion of any obligations outside of work. This article responds to calls for more studies which consider the influence of work and workplace culture on the motivation and ability of working fathers to take parental leave (Liebig & Oechsle, 2017; Haas & Hwang, 2019). Haas and Hwang argue that these workplace norms place *indirect* limits on paternal leave-taking (2019, p. 13). Other studies have illustrated the spectrum of responses employed by working fathers to manage work-family conflict more generally (Cooper, 2000; Tanquerel & Grau-Grau, 2020; Kaufman, 2013). The process of requesting parental leave from employers provides an opportunity to examine the relationship between worker and organization and, specifically, whether the strategies identified in previous work can be transposed to fathers planning to take a period of parental leave.

This article makes two contributions to existing literature. Firstly, it contributes to literature that has categorised the practices of working fathers in combining work and care. Existing typologies reflect the practices of fathers in countries with different cultural and policy climates to those which exist in the UK. Based on the findings from empirical work, this article will present two distinct approaches by fathers ('bold' and 'cautious') to

the process of requesting SPL, but also to their attitude to work whilst on leave and their working hours on return to work. This article will begin to align the literature on UK working fathers more clearly with other literature in the field.

Secondly, it demonstrates how the internalisation of the ideal worker norm has influenced the approach of professional fathers to requesting SPL and their working patterns on return to work. Specifically, cautious fathers adjusted their leave requests to accommodate their employer's needs or to avoid perceived career penalties as a result of taking leave. In other words, these fathers exercised *self-restraint* in requesting leave. The disadvantage with this approach is the perpetuation of workplace norms that underpin the ideal worker image (e.g. long working hours, constant availability). Thus the article highlights the durable nature of workplace norms that perpetuate gendered parenting roles in subtle and often unspoken ways. However, it also demonstrates that both groups of fathers exercise agency in different ways. Cautious fathers persist with their desire to take SPL despite constraining workplace norms, whilst bold fathers reject the ideal worker norm altogether.

The article begins by examining relevant literature on involved fatherhood and its relationship to gendered parenting roles. It will focus on the organizational context in which new fathers work and how they attempt to reconcile the ideal worker norm with their commitment to involved fatherhood. The third section describes the policy context and methodology adopted for the empirical work. The fourth section will present the findings of that work. The discussion and conclusion sections will extrapolate the key findings and argue that structural factors that perpetuate gendered parental roles are relevant to involved fathers, as they work against greater paternal involvement.

2. Literature review

2.1 Involved fathers and paternal agency

There has been an increasing amount of attention on the merits of involved fatherhood by policymakers worldwide in recent years, which (to an uneven extent) has filtered through to public discourse and fathering practice (Hobson, 2001; Doucet, 2006; Miller, 2011). Thus cultural expectations of what constitutes a 'good' father have generally shifted so that a purely breadwinning role is no longer regarded as sufficient (Dermott (2008); Kaufman, 2013). Involved fatherhood does not have a clear and accepted definition, however Lamb et al. (1987) argue that there are three key aspects: accessibility, engagement and responsibility. Involved fathers aim to be physically accessible or 'present' for their children (whether or not interaction is taking place), to have substantial and regular engagement with their children (such as feeding their children or playing with them), and to take responsibility for their children's welfare (Norman, 2017). Thus increasingly, new fathers are experiencing, and having to manage, work-family conflict.

Recent work has largely concentrated on the issue of low take up of parental leave by fathers in the UK (Birkett & Forbes, 2019; Kaufman, 2018; Twamley & Schober, 2019). These studies have identified cultural, personal and work-related issues as contributory factors in the lack of paternal take up. Common themes are socio-economic inequality in terms of knowledge of and eligibility for SPL, the influence of gendered expectations of parenting (with men frequently still positioned as secondary carers at societal level), the financial

costs of taking parental leave (particularly when fathers are the higher earning partner) and fathers' anxiety about the negative impact of taking leave in terms of their career prospects and their relationships with colleagues. Kaufman (2018), for example, found that participant fathers feared that they would be perceived as less committed by asking for parental leave. This article will contribute to some of the above issues through examining the experiences of a small number of British fathers who have taken SPL. In particular, it will concentrate on the influence of the work context: the normative pressures faced by these fathers at work and their strategies for dealing with these pressures.

Another relevant strand of research concerns the existence of the 'flexibility stigma'. Described first by Williams et al. (2013), the flexibility stigma is the perception that people who work flexibly to facilitate a parenting role are less committed to their paid work. This perception can affect the behaviour of working parents who want to take up flexible working, but fear negative career consequences. The flexibility stigma is a phenomenon in UK workplaces. Analysis of a large national survey by Chung (2020) found that a substantial minority of UK workers believe that flexible working creates more work for other colleagues (35%) and that the flexibility stigma negatively affects opportunities to be promoted (32%). Significantly, Chung also finds that these perceptions are gendered – men are more likely than women to agree with the statements above, despite the fact that women (especially mothers) are more likely than men to have personal experience of being negatively affected as a result of flexible working (2020, pp. 533–534). British fathers who have altered their working hours to accommodate their caring role also expose themselves to negative judgments from colleagues and managers (Kelland et al., 2022). Examples included being perceived as 'weird', abnormal and 'work-shy' (2022, pp. 1584–1585). The context of this article is slightly different in that the participant fathers were requesting parental leave rather than working flexibly, but did they feel constrained by the feeling that managers and colleagues might judge them negatively?

The importance of paternal agency, arguably overlooked by recent studies, will be a key theme of the article. Miller (2011) has argued that, in contrast to mothers, there is greater flexibility in men's relationship to fatherhood. She argues that British men are able to exercise a greater amount of agency as to the nature and extent of their involvement. This is because the cultural discourse of caring or active fatherhood is relatively new in the UK and therefore not as engrained as norms of motherhood (2011, p. 1096). In particular, Miller observed that men can more readily invoke the breadwinner ideology to justify their prioritisation of paid work than women (2011, p. 1105). This article will argue that, as professionals, participant fathers faced the constraint of the ideal worker norm at work. However, by adopting mitigating strategies, they were able to 'pass' as ideal workers (Reid, 2015; Tanquerel & Grau-Grau, 2020) whilst also maintaining their commitment to involved parenthood. Other participant fathers exercised agency by rejecting the ideal worker norm entirely.

Whilst fathers' ability to exercise agency is important, there are constraining factors outside the work context which clearly place restrictions on their ability to achieve greater involvement. Financial considerations are often crucial: the low level of statutory pay available for parents on SPL and the fact that many mothers would lose their enhanced maternity pay if they curtailed their maternity leave can restrict fathers' ability to take SPL (Birkett & Forbes, 2019, pp. 209–210). There are also cultural factors

which can work against greater paternal involvement. In particular, many heterosexual mothers in the UK have an entirely legitimate desire to take the maximum amount of leave and can discourage discussions about their partner taking leave post-birth (Birkett & Forbes, 2019; My Family Care/Women's Business Council, 2016). Others feel compelled to take a long period of maternity leave because of the pressure to conform to notions of 'good' motherhood, including the desire to breast feed during the first year (Birkett & Forbes, 2019; Twamley & Schober, 2019). So any discussion concerning paternal agency in a work context must take account of the fact that paternal agency might be constrained by these other factors.

2.2 Involved fathers, knowledge workers and the ideal worker norm

The norm of the ideal worker will be a key focus of this article. It is a central concept in the feminist critique of organizations. For Acker (1990), organizations reinforce and reproduce gender inequality through segregation of work roles and the emphasis on the disembodied and abstract nature of jobs which take no account of the personal characteristics of the people who complete them; factors which strengthen male dominance in working life. At the heart of Acker's critique is the concept of the ideal worker – a hypothetical worker 'who exists only for the job' and does not allow other commitments to impinge on their devotion to work (1990, p. 149). However, it is not merely the ideal worker norm that places demands on professional workers. Blair-Loy (2003) argues that middle-class parents are expected to demonstrate devotion to work and family. Both aspects have been institutionalised through cultural and workplace norms and imbued with a moral and emotional power. Williams et al. argue that 'the work devotion schema is both coercive … and seductive' (2013, p. 211), meaning that workers feel obliged to devote themselves to their job in the expectation that their career will progress as a result. However, work devotion also provides workers with a sense of meaning and identity in their lives. Thus many professionals internalise their devotion to work. They perceive excessive demands on their time as legitimate and they identify strongly with their employer (Byun & Won, 2020; Williams et al., 2013). So professional fathers who want to be active parents face a double bind that involves organizational but also internal pressure to conform to the ideal worker norm.

The fathers who participated in this study share common characteristics: they can usefully be described as professionals or 'knowledge workers'. The term 'knowledge worker' is a contested one, with no single definition that is accepted as authoritative. Davenport (2005) defines knowledge workers as those who 'think for a living'. Knowledge work can include technical or scientific jobs and those in professional services such as law and accountancy (Alvesson, 2004; Kvande, 2005). Management literature argues that employers should regard the knowledge worker as an asset rather than a cost (Drucker, 1999). Drucker argues that this requires a different management style than that used for manual workers in order to maintain their continuing loyalty and productivity. This entails giving responsibility and autonomy to these workers to organise their working time and monitor their own productivity: in short, they shoulder the responsibility for 'getting the job done' (Brescoll et al., 2013; Kvande, 2005, p. 78). This group of working fathers have the ability to balance their work and caring commitments effectively, but the *quid pro quo* is often longer working hours. This arrangement produces a 'win-win'

situation for employers: this group of workers maintain (or even exceed) their levels of productivity, however they remain satisfied with their employer because of the autonomy that they possess over their working time (Liebig & Kron, 2017). Knowledge workers can exercise autonomy over the times at which they work, but their workload remains constant.

Of course, autonomy over how and when work is completed is a separate issue to taking a period of parental leave. But arguably the same principles apply, namely provided fathers meet the invisible criterion of satisfactory past performance (Byun & Won, 2020, p. 608), organizations will not attempt to stand in their way. These fathers would also expect to exercise autonomy over their workload when they return to work post-leave, thus enabling them to maintain active fatherhood (provided, of course, that they maintain satisfactory performance).

How do organizations react to fathers who express a desire to take parental leave or reduce their working hours? Studies considering the relationship between fathers and working culture have been consistent in concluding that the latter tends not to encourage active fatherhood. In their study of two large UK based organizations, Burnett et al. (2013) found that regardless of company policies that purported to encourage flexible working for parents, line managers were generally not prepared to even acknowledge the legitimacy of fathers' desire to work flexibly or achieve a work-life balance. Working culture can reinforce the centrality of the breadwinner mentality and the gendered division of parenting roles (2013, p. 642). Holter (2007) finds a similar pattern, where fathers frequently struggled to gain organizational recognition of their right to be carers. Flexible working patterns are usually accessible for new mothers but not new fathers (Holter, 2007; Tanquerel & Grau-Grau, 2020). These underlying norms are bolstered by the (often perceived) need to work long hours (Blair-Loy & Williams, 2017), to be available beyond normal working hours (Williams et al., 2013) and the threat of negative consequences if fathers reduce their working hours or work flexibly to accommodate their caring role (Berdahl & Moon, 2013; Byun & Won, 2020; Kelland et al., 2022; Petts et al., 2022). There appears to be a fundamental disconnect between organizational agendas (built on the assumption that men, unlike women, are indispensable to the workforce) and the small but increasing number of fathers who seek greater involvement as parents.

This article will argue that the situation is more nuanced. Many executive and line managers now appreciate that it can be counter-productive to stand in the way of professional fathers who want to take leave. Many managers have a 'trust-based' relationship with knowledge workers and, in order to encourage their loyalty to the organization, want to be seen to facilitate their desire to be involved parents (Brandth & Kvande, 2019; Liebig & Kron, 2017; Närvi & Salmi, 2019). In countries where there is a legal right to take paternity leave or gender-neutral parental leave, managers cannot prevent fathers from doing so in any event. However, organizations are also aware that typically, professional fathers have internalised the ideal worker norm (Blair-Loy, 2003; Williams et al., 2013), and thus can be relied on to take leave in a way which will minimise any negative organizational impacts and not to disrupt norms around working hours and availability on their return to work. Brandth and Kvande (2019), for example, find that there was a widespread acceptance of fathers' plans to take parental leave by Norwegian managers, whether that involved taking the 10-week fathers' quota or a longer period. That acceptance can be attributed, at least in part, to the fact that there is a cultural

expectation in Norway that fathers will use at least 10 weeks of leave. However, they also find that fathers were sensitive to the needs of their employer in terms of the timing of leave-taking. They took leave at times when the impact of their absence would be felt least. This was partly selfish in that they were able to clearly demarcate their period of leave from work commitments, but also to demonstrate a willingness to cooperate and compromise with their employers. So it is not the case that professional fathers must fight against constraining workplace norms. One could argue that because of the internalisation of the ideal worker norm, many do not even view these norms as constraining. Instead, they are often prepared to work with their employers to seek a mutually beneficial solution.

Several studies have concentrated more specifically on fathers' orientation towards paid work as against their parenting commitments (Brandth & Kvande, 2002: Cooper (2000); Halrynjo (2009); Kaufman, (2013); Romero-Balsas et al., 2013). Tanquerel and Grau-Grau (2020) have provided an instructive tri-partite typology that is particularly relevant, as they consider how caring orientations influence fathers' workplace practices. They classify working fathers into three groups: *conformers, borderers* and *deviants*. In the first group are men whose paid work is of central importance to their lives and the transition to fatherhood does nothing to change that. They emphasise the value of their breadwinning role. Conformers would only discuss their family lives with colleagues 'to reinforce their authority, power or status' (2020, p. 689). They do not seek any flexibility in their work in order to ease work-family tension because they are happy to maintain their purely breadwinning role. Borderers express a desire to be more involved as parents and experience guilt when they are not able to do so. But whilst at work, they 'pass' as conformers, because they fear adverse consequences for their careers if they pursue greater involvement as fathers. Borderers strive to reconcile work and caring commitments by pursuing what the authors describe as 'invisible strategies' (2020, p. 695) to obtain some flexibility. For example, this group use informal means to obtain flexibility rather than being explicit in requesting flexibility for caring reasons. Ladge et al. (2015) make similar findings in a US context. Deviants are the smallest group of fathers – they are prepared to challenge the ideal worker norm and openly pursue visible strategies to achieve involved fatherhood e.g. making use of the right to seek flexibility for caring reasons. They are confident enough to resign from jobs that do not provide them with the flexibility that they need.

Tanquerel and Grau-Grau (2020) do not consider the impact of adopting these strategies on the careers of fathers who they consider to be in the borderer or deviant groups. This is where Reid's work (2015) is helpful. She considers how American professionals working in a multi-national consulting firm navigate work-life pressures. In particular, Reid (2015) is interested in how these workers reconcile the firm's expectation that all consultants embody the characteristics of the ideal worker (expected professional identity) with the perception of their own professional identity (experienced professional identities). She argues that whilst some embrace the expected professional identity, others diverge from it by adopting passing or revealing strategies. Passing involves (mis)-representing oneself as a member of the privileged group whilst diverging from some of its practices. Revealing involves an explicit strategy of divergence. Reid finds that, from the perspective of career progression, passing – at least to people higher up in the company – was more successful than revealing. However, she argues that passing

ultimately results in the perpetuation of the norms associated with the expected professional identity. Interestingly, she argues that adopting either strategy demonstrates agency by the workers concerned. The findings presented in this article will build on the work considered above but adapt it to the UK context and to fathers who want to take a period of parental leave.

The next section of the article will discuss the methods used to collect the empirical data for the study.

3. The study

Before moving on to consider the methodology, this section will firstly consider UK parental leave provision. There is up to 52 weeks of maternity leave available for British mothers, 39 of which are paid (provided eligibility criteria are met). However, only the first 6 weeks of leave are well paid – mothers receive 90% of their average weekly earnings with no upper earnings limit. The remaining 33 weeks are paid at the lower of £172.48 per week (during the 2023/24 financial year) or 90% of average weekly earnings. Paternity leave was introduced in 2003. This allows fathers to take 1 or 2 weeks of leave in the 8 weeks immediately following birth or adoption at the same low rate of pay as described above. Government data finds that nearly 60% of eligible fathers took some paternity leave in 2021/22 and just over 20% took other forms of leave (BEIS, 2023). Provided that qualifying conditions are met, employees can take SPL at any point in the first year post-birth or adoption. Up to three blocks of SPL can be taken under the statutory scheme, and more blocks can be taken if the parent's employer does not object. For employees with sufficient earnings, SPL will be paid for a maximum of 37 weeks at the same statutory rate as above. This is a very low rate of pay, as is evidenced when compared to the median weekly pay for UK employees working full-time, which was £640 in 2022 (House of Commons Library, 2022). The low rate of statutory pay has been a key factor in very low take-up rates for SPL: only 5% of UK fathers and 1% of mothers took SPL in 2021/22 (BEIS, 2023). In essence, SPL is transferable maternity leave as opposed to an individual right for fathers, so the latter depend on their spouse or partner agreeing to curtail their maternity leave.

The empirical work was carried out with a sample of working fathers who had taken SPL, or in one case, had taken unpaid parental leave. Given the relatively small target sample i.e. UK fathers who had enquired about taking or actually taken SPL, it was decided that a combination of purposive and convenience sampling was the most realistic (Bryman, 2016). A call for participants was made via social media and through websites which potential participants were likely to visit. Thus the participant fathers were self-selecting.

Qualitative interviews were completed with a total of 10 employed fathers. Eight worked for private sector employers, two for public sector employers. Their work was located in various cities across England. Interviews with 7 fathers took place during June–September 2017, with some of these being re-interviewed to obtain further information in September 2019. These participants took their period of SPL during 2016 and early 2017. In addition, three participant fathers were interviewed for the first time in September 2019. They had taken SPL during 2018 and early 2019.

The original seven interviews were generally conducted face-to-face and lasted between 45 and 60 min. They were recorded and transcribed. The interviews in 2019 were conducted by phone and were also recorded. These lasted around 30 min. Fathers were asked open-ended questions which covered topics such as their motivation for taking SPL, how much leave they asked for, the relationship they had with their managers and whether they felt that taking SPL had (or would have) any impact on their career prospects. The focus of the initial interviews was on the request process rather than the leave and post-leave periods.

The following table summarises key information about the employee participants.

As Table 1 indicates, the participant fathers shared similar characteristics in terms of the type of work that they undertook. All but one were professionals of various types and all but one educated to degree level. All had relatively long periods of continuous service. Clearly this is a narrow sample in terms of size and diversity, however it is broadly typical of British fathers who are likely to be taking SPL for the foreseeable future – namely professional employees who are committed to involved fatherhood alongside undertaking paid work. Most of the participants had the ability to work flexibly due to a high level of autonomy over when they carried their work, which facilitated their caring role on their return to work.

In addition to the interview with fathers, four interviews with HR professionals were also completed. Two were in-house HR managers in private sector companies. One of the companies is a well-known national retailer in the UK with around 70,000 employees. The other is a publicly quoted digital-based business with around 820 employees in the UK. The third HR manager worked in-house for a university in the north of England and the fourth was an HR consultant. All of the HR participants were based in the north-west of England. They were self-selecting in that they responded to the call for participants. These interviews focused on how their organizations (or corporate clients) responded to the implementation of SPL and, in particular, they were asked to provide an insight into the decision-making process inside organizations about whether to offer an enhanced level of pay to their employees or simply to replicate the low statutory rate of pay offered at national level.

Table 1. Participant fathers' job title, age and length of service (at date of interview) and period of SPL.

Employee	Job Title	Age	Length of Service (at date of interview)	Length of SPL taken
Andrew	Software Architect	41	4.5 years	3-month block plus alternate 2 week on, 2 week off thereafter
Brian	Commercial Data Analyst	32	9 years	3 months
Chris	Acquisition Finance	32	12 years	6 months
David	Lawyer	33	11 years	2.5 months
Edmond	Account manager – advertising agency	31	3 years	5.5 months
Fergus	Business Analyst (public sector)	33	9 years	3 months
Graham	Lawyer	40	18 years	1 month
Henry	Consultant	36	3 years	No SPL taken – 2 months unpaid parental leave
Ian	Senior Chef (public sector)	38	6 years	6 months
Justin	Lawyer	35	7 years	6 months

Preliminary analysis of the interview transcripts was carried out using NVivo software. This involved creating a series of descriptive codes of recurring themes from the interviews. These codes were produced entirely from the data i.e. no *a priori* codes were used. This was because the author decided to allow themes to develop inductively from the data. Subsequent analysis was carried out using the template analysis technique (King, 2021). Template analysis is a method of analysing qualitative data that produces a coding template, which is usually generated from analysis of a small portion of the data and then applied to the remainder. This is an iterative process which can lead to the modification of the original template. Descriptive codes that covered similar issues were grouped together and resulted in the creation of more general or 'higher order codes' (King, 2021, p. 431). However, the template analysis method is flexible in that it does not insist on a clear distinction between codes that are descriptive and those that are thematic. Neither does it prescribe that codes should fit into the norm of a three-level hierarchy. So, for example, interview data that concerned the attitudes of the participant (and their partner) to shared parenting or how financial considerations influenced the participant's decision (taken with their partner) as to whether and when the father took the period of leave were grouped under a code headed 'relevant factors for couples deciding whether to take SPL'. Use of this process facilitated cross-case analysis and the emergence of common themes from the interview data. Table 2 details the codes used by the author to organise the data thematically. Analysis of these codes, particularly those in the first section (employee perspectives on the request process), revealed the importance of fathers' self-restraint in the request process and the implicit significance of maintaining the ideal worker norm. However, it was equally clear that some fathers took an unconstrained approach. The cautious and bold labels were developed as a result of this analysis. Other key themes that emerged were the fact that fathers had taken the initiative to seek out information on SPL before speaking to their employer, the generally positive experience of the fathers in their interactions with managers which

Table 2. Codes produced by template analysis of interview data.

1. Request process – employee perspective
1.1 Accessibility of information from employer
1.2 Written policy in place?
1.3 Awareness of male colleagues who had accessed flexible working to help with care
1.4 Timing of SPL request – at a time convenient to employer?
1.5 Employer viewed as progressive
1.6 Fear of negative impact of taking SPL on career
1.7 Whether SPL taken in a single block
1.8 Administration of SPL (form filling)
1.9 Use of SPLIT days
2. Request process – manager perspective
2.1 Relationship with manager
2.1.1 Supportive manager/positive experience
2.1.2 Manager's lack of knowledge of the policy
2.2 Generational differences between managers and fathers
3. Characteristics of employed fathers taking SPL
3.1 Continuity of service
3.2 Amount of SPL taken
3.3 Whether father took paternity leave
3.4 Educational qualifications
3.5 Feeling 'entitled' to take SPL
3.6 Attitude towards parenting role/motivation for taking SPL

was complemented by the progressive attitude of their employers, and the commitment of participants to involved fatherhood. Whilst clearly the sample of fathers is limited and statistical generalisability cannot be claimed, the insight provided by the data will provide a useful counterpoint against which to measure findings from larger and more diverse groups of working fathers in the future.

4. Findings

4.1 Fathers' strategic approaches to negate the impact of taking leave on their career

This section of the findings will argue that it is possible to discern two distinct approaches to the request process and to the attitude of the participant fathers to their working hours on return to work (see Table 3). Having discussed the key characteristics of these approaches, the findings from the interview data will be presented in more detail. Further qualitative research will be necessary to establish whether these initial findings can be generalised to a larger cohort.

All the participant fathers clearly share two main characteristics: they prioritise their parental role in the early years of their child's life and express commitment to sharing the responsibilities of being a parent with their partner. However, based on the interview data, they can be divided into two groups: 'cautious' and 'bold' fathers. It should be emphasised that even cautious fathers are unafraid to be 'visible' as committed parents at work, as is evidenced by their decision to take SPL. In this respect, they can be distinguished from Tanquerel and Grau-Grau's borderer category (2020). Nevertheless, they have internalised the ideal worker norm to a greater extent than bold fathers and consequently adopt the mitigating strategies discussed below. Fathers in this group also tend to be more cautious on their return to work by maintaining full-time working hours. This is a self-restrained approach that does not present an explicit challenge to established (male) organizational norms in relation to knowledge workers.

The second group is the 'bold' fathers. They tend to be less devoted to the ideal worker norm and less concerned about their employer's needs from a business perspective. For example, they would not deliberately take SPL during a quiet period or take a shorter period of leave because of concerns about career penalties. On returning to work, they are prepared to adjust their working hours to make time for their parenting role. They may work a shorter week or adopt a more unusual working pattern such as the one described in the findings section. Paternal adoption of these more disruptive working

Table 3. Key characteristics of 'cautious' and 'bold' fathers.

	Cautious	Bold
Approach to the request process	Internalisation of ideal worker norm leads to concerns over career penalties that influence decisions on timing and/or length of leave period	Less devotion to the ideal worker norm means that SPL request is unaffected by anxiety over career penalty
Practice whilst on leave	Maintains contact with work or undertakes work during leave period	Little work-related contact with colleagues
Practice on return to work	Returns full-time	Adjustment of working pattern/hours to accommodate parental role e.g. shorter working week

patterns presents a stronger challenge to masculine work norms than the 'cautious' group. However, as discussed below, bold fathers are also capable of displaying cautious or conformist behaviour in their work practices. So it is important to emphasise that the demarcation between the two groups should not be drawn too starkly.

The source of this bold approach cannot be attributed entirely to the fact that these fathers were confident that they would find alternative work if they had encountered resistance to their request for SPL. Andrew expressed confidence that he would have been able to find suitable alternative work, but that was not a universal experience. Ian, for example, admitted that trying to find work as a chef in the private sector 'would have been a difficult decision to take' due to the evening and weekend work that would have been involved. Edmond, another father in the bold category, referred to the fact that his employer was unusual amongst advertising agencies in having working hours that were compatible with caring responsibilities. So although he was confident that he would have found alternative work, moving to another firm would have resulted in having far less time to spend with his family. As discussed below, a factor in Edmond's bold approach was that he is not career-driven, so he would have been prepared to accept any negative consequences from taking SPL. Neither can their boldness be attributed to financial motives for taking leave. Undoubtedly this played a part, but there were bold fathers (Ian and Fergus) who did not receive enhanced pay whilst on leave. Equally there were cautious fathers (Brian and David) who received enhanced pay. So whilst career prospects and money are clearly significant factors, neither appear to be conclusive in terms of their approach to the request process and to their working hours on return.

Table 4 summarises interview data which categorises the participant fathers into the bold or cautious group, as well as presenting information on whether they had access

Table 4. Further details of participant fathers' pay whilst on leave, use of KIT days, use of flexible working.

Employee	Child born / total no. of children	Access to enhanced pay?	Used KIT days?	Worked flexibly post-SPL?	Bold or cautious approach
Andrew	November 2016 / 1	Yes – 6 months full pay	Yes – 3 days	Yes – 2 weeks on, 2 weeks off	Bold
Brian	Nov 2016 / 2	Yes – 4 weeks full pay, 8 weeks half	Yes – 3 days	Yes – 4 days for 6 months then FT	Cautious
Chris	June 2016 / 1	No	No	No	Borderline bold/ cautious
David	Nov 2016 / 2	Yes – 50% normal pay	No	No	Cautious
Edmond	Dec 2016 / 1	Yes – £250 / week (for first 3 months only)	Yes – 5/ 6 days	Yes – 4 days / week	Bold
Fergus	August 2016 / 2	No	Yes – 3/ 4 days	Yes – 5 days compressed to 4	Bold
Graham	Jan 2016 / 2	No	No	No	Cautious
Henry	April 2018 / 1	No	No	Yes – 4 days / week	N/A as did not take SPL
Ian	July 2018 / 1	No	Yes – 3/ 4 days	Yes – 4 days / week	Bold
Justin	November 2018 / 1	Yes – 50% normal pay	No	Yes (planned to work full-time hours but with flexible conditions)	Bold

to enhanced pay, whether they took keeping-in-touch (KIT) days during their period of leave and whether they altered their working hours post-leave. Fathers who adopted one of the mitigating strategies detailed below were placed in the cautious group. Fathers who explicitly said that they did not adjust their request to take account of their work situation were placed in the bold group. For fathers where the interview data did not clearly put them into either group, a longer period of leave or a reduction in working hours post-leave was taken as evidence of a bold approach. Chris is the only participant who did not fit clearly into either category. He took quite a long period of SPL (6 months), which would normally have put him into the bold category. However, as discussed below, he also adopted quite a cautious strategy in terms of requesting SPL and resumed full-time hours on return to work. Chris' case underlines that the two categories are indicative only, as individual fathers can combine elements of cautious and bold behaviour.

Before considering the approaches of the two groups of fathers to the request process, a general observation is that all fathers viewed SPL as a right and were determined to take it regardless of any organizational barriers that they might come across. They had done research into SPL prior to approaching their managers. Even David (Lawyer), who is in the cautious group, said: 'I saw it as an entitlement in terms of having the right to have SPL because I knew about the legislation.' Fergus (Business Analyst) had a bullish attitude to the request process: ' … it never crossed my mind that someone might deny it because I just thought this is law, we're a progressive organisation … '. This quote is typical of a bold approach, but even those in the cautious group felt that the introduction of SPL had legitimised their desire to be involved fathers.

Existing research has highlighted fathers' concern that taking parental leave might have a detrimental effect on their job or career prospects (Kaufman & Almqvist, 2017; Tanquerel & Grau-Grau, 2020). This was the case with fathers in the cautious group. It was clear that they felt anxious about taking SPL and adopted mitigating strategies. One strategy was to consult with their manager prior to making a formal request to ensure that they took SPL at a convenient time for their employer. One father said:

> … so rather than me bringing this to them and saying 'this is what I'm doing, I'm leaving the office on September and you won't see me until March', there was a bit of a requirement to have a sort of more friendly round the table chat around is this a good time to do this, I'd really like to do this, *but can the business accommodate it*, *what would my job role look like when I came back* [emphasis added], any assurances around continuity of my job when I return to work etc. (Chris, Acquisition Finance)

This is an example of self-restraint i.e. fathers requesting leave at a convenient time for their employers without having to be asked to do so. It is interesting that Chris took the opportunity to seek clarity on his work situation following his return from SPL, in order to receive assurances that his job would remain the same on his return. This extract also demonstrates some anxiety around job security, despite the existence of statutory rules that guarantee continuity of employment on return to work.[1]

Another strategy that was mentioned several times was to use KIT days to support or maintain contact with colleagues and managers during the period of leave. This was a strategy adopted by cautious and bold fathers alike. Some fathers (e.g. Fergus and Edmond) wanted to take KIT days because it enabled them to get a few days on full

pay. Ian took a few KIT days in order to support his colleagues during a particularly busy period when international students visited the university at which he worked for a residential summer school. Andrew had a more strategic motivation:

> I had taken some keeping in touch days during that [period of SPL] … I did three keeping in touch days during the three-month period, which were really just one day [each]. I timed them to coincide with monthly status review meetings, just as good a time as any, but *mostly to be in to show my face* [emphasis added] and to just socially and catch up with colleagues and to see how work had been progressing while I wasn't there. (Andrew, Software Architect)

Arguably, this quote demonstrates his anxiety about becoming invisible to colleagues during the period of parental leave. His desire to maintain his identity as an ideal worker is also implicit, even when he was not required to be at work. Andrew's strategic approach to KIT days, when overall he adopted a bold approach, demonstrates that the line between bold and cautious categories should not be drawn too sharply.

There was also evidence that work commitments impinged on fathers' periods of parental leave. Henry described checking his phone whilst his daughter was napping to make sure that anything work-related was forwarded on to his colleagues. The desire to maintain contact with work appears to be a voluntary choice, but illustrates the (internal and external) pressure on these fathers to maintain the ideal worker norm.

There is evidence that fathers' desire to maintain their identity as an ideal worker and anxiety about damaging their career prospects resulted in requests for shorter periods of leave than they might ideally wish to take:

> I was taking a month [of SPL] and I remember having a conversation with my wife and she said 'how long are you going to take?' … I said 'a month' and I think she said 'well why just a month?' I said: 'I don't know whether if I'm out for more than a month then … will work go other ways, and I'll come back and the work won't be there anymore'. (Graham, lawyer)

This quote illustrates the internal struggle of some fathers between their dedication to involved fatherhood whilst maintaining a high level of commitment to the ideal worker norm. Equally, it could be explained by the anxiety that professionals who are reliant on work from clients feel that the latter may go to another firm whilst they are on leave. As a result, Graham demonstrated self-restraint in terms of his SPL request without the need for his employer's intervention. Although some participant fathers in client-facing roles said that clients supported their decision to take SPL, it is likely to be a sub-conscious source of anxiety that again results in self-restraint.

What characterises the approach of the bold group of fathers? Andrew is perhaps the strongest example of a bold approach in that he took a relatively long period of SPL (3 months) and then returned to work having agreed a '2 week on, 2 week off' pattern of work for the remainder of the first year post-birth. Andrew pursued a formal and visible strategy to facilitate involved fatherhood, adopting a working pattern that clearly presented a challenge to the ideal worker norm. However, Andrew could not have adopted such a radical approach to his post-leave working arrangements without considerable support from his and his wife's employer. His employer is a French-based multi-national technology company with a written SPL policy in place and a large HR department. He also had enough continuous employment to qualify for a company

benefit which entitled him to 26 weeks of full pay whilst on leave. So whilst this is a clear example of diversion from the ideal worker norm, the supportive roles of Andrew's wife and both of their employers should not be overlooked.

A strategy adopted by three bold fathers (Andrew, Edmond and Justin) was to have a clear plan about how long they wanted their period of leave to last, but also about what they wanted the whole first year post-birth to look like. Andrew knew that he wanted to take a 3-month block of leave and then alternate the care of their child with his wife for the remainder of the year. Edmond made a flexible working request (4 days per week) at the same time as he requested SPL. He wanted to know what his working hours would be post-leave so he and his wife could make childcare arrangements. Justin and his partner also mapped out the post-birth year well in advance: ' … you need to get a spreadsheet with weeks 1–52, start drawing in the blocks, who is taking it where [*sic*], what dates is that going to be … '. As well as having the benefit of transparency, this approach provides certainty for employers, which enables them to plan ahead.

Whilst some of our participant fathers were nervous about the potentially negative effect of taking SPL, those in the bold category were more philosophical about it. Edmond and Fergus admitted that they were not motivated by career aspirations at all. This rejection of the ideal worker norm is another characteristic of the bold group. Although some admitted that their career had been detrimentally affected by their decision to take SPL, they were able to accept it because they felt that it was a temporary setback. An example of this is Andrew's situation. To accommodate his '2 week on, two week off' working pattern after his continuous block of SPL, he and his manager had to make adjustments to reduce his workload on projects where he worked closely with others. He felt that this arrangement had resulted in some difficulties:

> … it's early to say but I do have something of a feeling that it has had a mild negative effect, because I've just not been around to attend the meetings and to have the conversations I might have otherwise had … I may be becoming slightly side-lined because of a lack of availability … Any cost to my career is probably relatively mild and it'll recover in a year or two, but it's a minor setback maybe. (Andrew, Software Architect)

However, for others, any negative effect was not significant when compared with the importance of parenting:

> I think in terms of career prospects and progression, I think [taking SPL] probably has slowed that a bit, but then if I'm honest I'm not a massively career driven person anyway. It was never the main focus of my life, so it's not really a significant impact for me but, yes, I think it probably does slow things down a bit on that front. (Edmond, marketing)

4.2 Employer support for participant fathers

This section of the findings will consider the level of support offered to our participant fathers. A key form of support is provision of enhanced pay to parents taking SPL i.e. at a higher level than the statutory figure. Five employers offered enhanced pay to fathers and four did not. (I am not including Henry's employer as he took unpaid parental leave – see Table 4 for more detail.) With one exception, the firms offering enhanced pay were large multi-national companies. However, Edmond and Justin both said that the cut off point for their enhanced pay was 39 weeks post-birth. Both men took leave in the

second half of the first year, which meant that some of their leave was unpaid. Justin said that he had brought up this issue with his employer's HR department and wanted the firm to change this aspect of the policy, but without success. The 39-week cut off point is in line with the point at which the statutory level of pay for SPL ceases, but given that this is a company policy and businesses have complete discretion over pay, it does seem as though it is a deliberate strategy to discourage men from taking SPL in the last 3 months of the first year.

However, the provision of financial support by these employers did not always translate into a supportive request process. From analysing the interview data, three fathers (Andrew, Brian and Edmond) had managers who were supportive, whilst two (David and Justin) did encounter some negative reactions. The managers of the fathers who took SPL but did not receive enhanced pay (Chris, Fergus and Ian) were either actively supportive or neutral. What makes for a supportive request process? Edmond is an example of a father who had a largely positive experience of the request process. His employer (an advertising agency) had a written SPL policy as well as provision for enhanced pay. In addition, the support that he received from his managers facilitated the process. He submitted a post-leave flexible working request at the same time as he requested SPL and was initially met with a holding response from Human Resources. His manager then intervened to push HR for a clear response on this issue before Edmond went on leave, and the request was approved. It is active support like this that complements rights that may be available on paper but can be discouraged in reality. He also received assurance that he was valued and that taking SPL would not affect his prospects of promotion. Before he went on leave, Edmond and his manager had the following exchange:

> she said to me I would be missed and before I went off I got a pay rise and she spoke to me about the fact that they'd like to progress me when I come back, within a certain amount of time, so you know, it definitely felt that I was kind of well valued and that they were looking forward to me coming back and picking up what I was doing and moving forward. (Edmond, marketing)

He also highlighted the significance of the gender balance in the company that he works for, where women outnumbered men by around 50% and both the Business Director and the Managing Director of the company had young kids. This finding confirms the established link between gender-balanced or female-dominated workplaces and the provision of greater managerial support for new fathers to take parental leave or work flexibly (Bygren & Duvander, 2006; Haas & Hwang, 2007, 2019).

By contrast, lawyers David, Graham and Justin had to deal with some incredulous reactions from their managers and some negative reactions. When Justin sent an email with the dates of his leave to the small group of partners with whom he worked, one partner mistakenly thought he was taking 6 weeks holiday: 'when I said: "I'm taking six months leave", he was like "what?" It wasn't positive or negative. It wasn't "that's great" or "don't do that", it was more like: what??'. It was only when Justin explained that his partner did not have access to well paid maternity pay and that it made financial sense for him to take leave, that the partner began to show some understanding about why he would want to take it. David and Graham experienced similar incredulity from older partners, which they felt reflected generational differences in approach to the fatherhood

role. But it also went further than incredulity. Justin recounts how one partner was 'so difficult' about Justin taking a small amount of annual leave so that he did not have to return to work between the end of the Easter holidays and the start of his leave period. He said the following:

> One of [the partner's] other team members was going off on maternity leave and I remember thinking, I bet you wouldn't have dared send that email to her if she had asked for a bit of flexibility around her leaving date. (Justin, lawyer)

These examples illustrate the importance of a supportive and facilitatory attitude from line managers during the request process. The equivocal reactions noted above did not stop these fathers from taking leave, but they did have an impact on their lived experience of the request process. It also illustrates the uphill struggle that some fathers can face in obtaining acceptance that taking parental leave is a legitimate thing to do.

All fathers commented on the positive reaction that they received from colleagues when they announced their decision to take SPL and on their return. Fergus commented that he felt that his period of SPL had actually improved the relationship between himself and his colleagues:

> But also it was an interesting balance between the stuff they had been working on, including the projects they were covering on my behalf, which I obviously fully appreciated and continued to appreciate, and I think it created a good working relationship … or we established a better working relationship, between the team and with my Manager, because we could be really open about how that [his period of SPL] had been for both of us. (Fergus, Business Analyst)

Fergus describes bringing his son along to a team lunch during his leave. Perhaps this helped his manager and his colleagues to see a more human side to Fergus. Justin's period of leave sparked questions about SPL from a couple of his male colleagues that were newly married. He also commented that he thought that his period of leave had benefitted his more inexperienced colleagues as they had exposure to a better standard of work in his absence. Given the possibility that new fathers as well as new mothers could take time out of the workforce, Justin felt that SPL presented the prospect of greater gender parity in terms opportunities for development to junior colleagues.

Another form of support that employers can offer is to organise cover for employees taking SPL. Only one employer (Ian's employer) ensured that his role was covered during his absence. Interestingly, Ian was the only father in the sample who was not a knowledge worker. He was part of a small catering team on a university campus, and therefore covering his role was presumably driven by necessity. The (lack of) provision of absence cover for fathers taking parental leave in professional services firms could be an area for future research. The small sample size is clearly not representative, but this would appear to be one area where employers could improve support for employees.

5. Discussion and recommendations

Previous studies involving British fathers who have sought flexibility or reduced working hours to prioritise their caring role have painted a negative picture of their workplace context (Burnett et al., 2013; Kelland et al., 2022). These fathers have struggled to have their needs recognised as legitimate and have been subjected to caricature and ridicule.

By contrast, this study finds that these experiences are not universal and therefore more longitudinal research into the short and long-term consequences of fathers' take-up of SPL on their careers is needed. As discussed above, some participant fathers have experienced managers and colleagues who have lacked understanding of their desire to take leave, but generally managers and colleagues appear to have been neutral or supportive of their decision. In addition, the introduction of SPL seems to have bestowed legitimacy on fathers' desire to take leave, at least in terms of the formal and visible elements of many organizations. However, the last statement must be qualified by the recognition that all except one of the participant fathers were professionals who had actively sought out information on SPL and were knowledgeable about their rights. In terms of consequences for career prospects, there are clear differences between, for example, fathers who work reduced hours long-term and those who request SPL but then resume full-time hours. There is an argument that fathers in the latter group can still be regarded as ideal workers from an organizational perspective. So the generally positive experiences of fathers in their dealings with managers must be tempered by the recognition that paternal decisions as regards their working hours when they return, rather than taking leave itself, would seem to be more crucial from a career perspective.

However, the informal elements of workplace culture, principally the ideal worker norm, continue to influence paternal strategies when requesting leave and can lead to self-restraint. The cautious group of professional fathers felt that they needed to adopt strategies to maintain the ideal worker norm or to ameliorate any career penalty that they think might occur as a result of taking up SPL. Thus, using Reid's duality of passing or revealing (2015), they want to 'pass' as ideal workers whilst maintaining their desire to be involved parents. To some extent, organizations can rely on this group of cautious fathers to consider organizational needs alongside their own when requesting SPL and on their return to work. The bold group have more in common with Reid's 'revealing' workers: they are willing to ask for a longer continuous period of leave or, more radically, consider taking discontinuous periods (though the latter would require employer consent). They are prepared to consider reducing their working hours or working flexibly to accommodate their caring role. However, Reid's two groups do not map neatly onto the two groups of fathers in that the behaviour of some fathers combined traits of both passing and revealing. Andrew, for example, was keen to maintain his visibility at work during his 3-month block of SPL, which appeared to demonstrate a desire to maintain ideal worker status. But he was also prepared to work two weeks per month over a six-month period in order to divide care equally between him and his wife during the first year. So whilst this article argues that two distinct approaches to the pre- and post-SPL periods are discernible, the division between them is not rigid. Even bold fathers wanted to take a consensus-driven approach.

A potential consequence of a self-restrained approach is that it can contribute to the continued prevalence of the ideal worker norm in professional workplaces. Tanquerel and Grau-Grau argue that men in the borderer category are reluctant to ask for flexible conditions on a formal basis as it would reveal their deviance from the ideal worker norm (2020, p. 697). The same criticism cannot be levelled at fathers in the cautious category, as they have revealed their deviance by requesting SPL (albeit not to the extent of the bold fathers). However, by adopting a cautious approach to the request process and/or continuing to work full-time post-leave, they continue to adhere to the ideal worker

norm. Such adherence is understandable, as their work generally provides them with the autonomy to organise their own workload, which in turn facilitates their desire to be involved fathers. But in terms of trying to challenge the ideal worker norm, whose dominance has resulted in adverse career consequences for UK women who work flexibly (Chung, 2020), this approach very much maintains the status quo. In the absence of change originating from organizations, arguably a more radical approach is needed. Working fathers, together with mothers, need to campaign for more profound change: one which does not define commitment to the organization by how many hours a person works or what type of contract they are employed on.

Much previous work on this topic has analysed the structural factors that prevent or dissuade men from taking parental leave (Kaufman, 2018; Birkett & Forbes, 2019). But as Miller (2011) has pointed out, paternal agency also plays a role in the 'falling back' process. It can be argued that cautious fathers exercise constrained agency whilst bold fathers exercise unconstrained agency. But at least both groups are taking action that expresses their commitment to involved fatherhood in a way that, to a greater or lesser extent, makes them vulnerable to colleagues at work and might even impact their career progression. The findings from this study suggest that if fathers who are committed to equal parenting are exercising caution in requesting SPL, British fathers more generally must be even more so. Therefore alongside the need to address the constraining policy and cultural factors described above, future research should continue to explore the interaction between structural and agential factors in paternal decision-making.

The experience of some of the participant fathers suggests that their anxiety about the process originated in their consideration of the anticipated, rather than the real, consequences of making a request. In other words, they considered the worst-case scenario (as demonstrated by the quote from Graham above) which in turn dictated their cautious strategy. This reaction may reflect the fact that some are not prepared to be stoic about the negative consequences that might from their decision to take leave. Mothers, by contrast, are perhaps more willing to accept any negative consequences as the price to be paid for taking maternity leave. This is neatly encapsulated in this quote from Graham that recalled a conversation with his wife about the period of leave that he planned to take:

> … she said 'well do you know what? [T]hat's what women have to go through [i.e. taking maternity leave], plenty of people in your firm will have taken nine months or a year out and they do that and they come back and it works and they make it work because they have to', which was a really good point.

The findings from this study indicate that bold fathers are more likely to want to adjust their working hours to accommodate childcare post-SPL. However more longitudinal research is needed to determine whether fathers that take SPL are more likely to work flexibly post-leave and, if so, to assess any consequences in terms of career progression.

Moving on to consider the organizational perspective, the data suggests that the explanation for the cautious approach lies not in the formal or visible elements of the organization (namely policies and their enforcement by managers) but in the interaction between fathers and informal factors at organizational level that originate in working culture i.e. normative expectations of professionals reinforced by working practices.

The fact that fathers appear to have internalised values associated with the ideal working norm suggests that working culture (at least as far as professionals are concerned) still reinforces these values. So whilst the desire of new fathers to be involved parents appears to be increasingly acknowledged (albeit grudgingly in some cases), that acknowledgment has yet to be converted into concrete changes to organizational values and working practices. Sympathetic employers need to be cognisant of the power of the ideal worker norm and take measures to present alternative organizational values and implement working practices that complement those values. Presenteeism or regularly working beyond contractual hours should be discouraged. Client expectations on availability of professionals should be managed more effectively to minimise evening and weekend working. There should be explicit acknowledgement that fathers who work flexibly or part-time are not less committed and workers who are not full-time should not be prevented from applying for promotion to management roles. In this context, fathers who are committed to involved parenting would be emboldened to pursue a 'bold' rather than an 'cautious' approach to combining work and care without feeling that their career progression will be compromised.

6. Conclusion

The article presented the findings of empirical research with British fathers who had taken SPL. The article has argued that two approaches to the request process are discernible from the interview data. The participant fathers were generally high-earning professionals who were expected to be fully committed to work. As a result of the internalisation of the ideal worker norm, the 'cautious' group of fathers took a self-restrained approach. This group also maintained contact with work during the period of leave and maintained full-time hours on their return to work. They felt conflicted by their commitment to the ideal worker norm and cautious about potential career penalties as a result of taking leave. A second group of fathers (the bold group) felt less constrained in their approach to requesting SPL and expressed a desire to depart from a full-time working pattern post-leave.

Given that the participants are among the relatively small number of UK fathers that have taken SPL to date, some reflection is needed on how the labels 'cautious' and 'bold' translate to British fathers in general. The 'cautious' label is intended to characterise their overall approach to the request process, but as fathers who have taken SPL, they are much more likely to challenge the ideal worker norm than fathers who, for example, use annual leave around the birth or adoption of their child – or who take no leave at all. All the participant fathers are in the vanguard of change and deserve to be lauded. Clearly the pressure that originates from the ideal worker norm is a factor which affects the decision making of fathers generally about whether to take parental leave. This much larger group of fathers needs to be mobilised to make greater use of paternity leave and SPL in order to precipitate change, not just in terms of challenging the ideal worker norm, but also the gendered perception of parental roles. The role of policymakers and stakeholders is crucial in trying to inform and persuade parents-to-be of the benefits of paternal sole caring in the early years.

The article demonstrates that the ideal worker norm continues to represent a psychological as well as an organizational barrier to greater involvement in parenting for new

fathers. Minimal organizational intervention is required because many professional fathers can be trusted to take their employer's priorities into account when submitting a request for leave. They can also be trusted to resume their existing levels of productivity on their return post-leave. Thus existing workplace culture that underpins the ideal worker norm (often coupled with paternal anxiety about the potentially negative consequences of taking leave and/or working flexibly), remains influential and goes unchallenged. As a result, many new fathers will continue to be deterred from requesting parental leave or adjusting their existing working patterns.

If there is to be movement towards gender equal parenting in countries characterised as liberal welfare regimes, fathers, policymakers and organizations must seek to address the internal conflict and anxiety that many professional fathers feel about taking parental leave or adjusting their working hours. Policymakers have a crucial role in making the case for change and facilitating increased paternal take up. Organizations should seek to foster a supportive culture where active fatherhood is normalised and men have a genuine opportunity to prioritise their parental role without jeopardising their career development. If these structural barriers begin to be addressed, we may see more British fathers who will embrace involved fatherhood.

Note

1. Regulation 40, Shared Parental Leave Regulations 2014.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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