

Do I feel entitled to it? Caring dads after the equalization of parental leave in Spain

International
Journal of
Sociology and
Social Policy

José Andrés Fernández-Cornejo

*Department of Applied Economics, Public Economics and Political Economy,
Complutense University of Madrid, Madrid, Spain*

Cristina Castellanos-Serrano

*Department of Applied Economics, National Distance Education University,
Madrid, Spain*

Eva Del Pozo-García

*Department of Financial and Actuarial Economics and Statistics,
Complutense University of Madrid, Madrid, Spain*

Maite Palomo-Vadillo

Department of Business Management, ESIC University, Pozuelo de Alarcón, Spain

Juan Ignacio Cáceres-Ruiz

Department of Economics, San Pablo CEU University, Madrid, Spain, and

Lorenzo Escot

*Department of Applied Economics, Public Economics and Political Economy,
Faculty of Statistical Studies, Complutense University of Madrid, Madrid, Spain*

Received 31 August 2024
Revised 25 September 2024
Accepted 26 September 2024

Abstract

Purpose – In January 2021, Spanish paid parental leave for fathers was fully equated with that for mothers. Is this facilitating working fathers developing an identity of caring fathers?

Design/methodology/approach – We conducted qualitative research based on 31 interviews with heterosexual fathers residing in Spain, who had a child from January 1, 2021 onwards, who cohabited with the baby's mother, and who were salaried. We also added two mothers with the same characteristics and seven human resources managers from large companies.

Findings – There has been a rapid acceptance and normalization of the use of these new equalized leaves. For many fathers this has been accompanied by the experience of a greater sense of “being legitimized” to engage in caregiving. The intensity of this process could be subject to two opposing forces. One in favor, especially when fathers care alone for as long as possible; and one against, when fathers assume the role of the mother's helper and when the support of significant and relevant others is lacking in several domains, including the work place.

Social implications – Whether this ambivalence is resolved in favor of advancement could depend on how successful public policy is. Reforms of parental leave systems should encourage men to take on single-handed care, and companies should be encouraged to become more aware of the need for co-responsibility between fathers and mothers in childcare.

Originality/value – Spain now has one of the most gender-equal parental leave systems in the world. It is important to know what meaning new fathers are giving to this advance and to what extent this is facilitating the emergence of a caregiving masculinity.

Keywords Equal paid parental leave, Caring masculinities, Caregiving father, Identity, Legitimacy

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The parental leave system is a key public policy instrument that allows many parents to balance their work and family life at the point in their life cycle when they have or adopt a

Special thanks to Ana Cuadrado for her advice and support for this research.

Funding: This research was funded by the Spanish National Plan for Scientific and Technical Research and Innovation, Ref: RTI2018-094901-B-I00.



child. In addition, the use of parental leave not only has a positive effect on the well-being of parents but also on the well-being of their children (Kaufman, 2020; Ch. 2). In recent years there have been many reform processes of parental leave systems. One of the main aims of these reforms is to encourage fathers to use parental leave as much as mothers. This is intended to contribute to the advancement of gender equality in unpaid care, which is the counterpart of gender equality in the labor market (Hook, 2006).

The emergence of the figure of the father involved in the care of his children constitutes a very relevant dimension of what Elliott (2016) calls “caring masculinities”, which is a more nourishing and satisfying model of masculinity for men than hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995).

Spain is a very interesting example of how social sensitivity to gender equality in the labor market and to the caring masculinities model may have inspired a recent reform of its parental leave system. In January 2021, the paid leave of the father was fully equated with that of the mother. Now, the leave is referred to as “birth and childcare leave” (BCL). It is a statutory 16-week leave, fully remunerated and non-transferable (Meil *et al.*, 2023), to which both parents have access (it is an individual entitlement). Thus, Spain now has one of the most gender-equal parental leave systems in the world.

In this novel context, we pose several research questions: Is the equalization of paid leave in Spain making it easier for working fathers to develop an identity of caring fathers (compatible with the idea of caring masculinities)? Does this new context make it easier for fathers to feel more legitimized to devote themselves to baby care? What are the factors that drive or slow down these processes?

To address these questions we conducted qualitative research based on 31 interviews with heterosexual fathers residing in Spain, who had a child from January 1, 2021 (date of equalization of leaves) onwards, who cohabited with the baby’s mother, and who were salaried. We also added two mothers with the same characteristics and seven human resources managers from large companies. This is the first research of this type carried out after the equalization process of paid leave in Spain.

In order to address a complex issue such as the father-caregiver identity construction process, we decided to use symbolic interactionism as a theoretical framework, placing special emphasis on the most recent “identity theory” (Burke and Stets, 2009) that emanates from this framework. Using this theoretical framework in the field of parental leave research is also an original feature of this research.

2. Leave policies in Spain

The structure of the parental leave system in Spain is twofold: paid parental leave of 16 weeks (birth and childcare leave) and unpaid parental leave of up to 3 years (unpaid childcare leave). In addition, there are a number of additional, less significant benefits (Meil *et al.*, 2023).

BCL is an individual and non-transferable leave that each of the two parents is entitled to. It protects the situations of birth, adoption and foster care. The length of leave is 16 weeks: six weeks are mandatory and must be taken (full time) following the birth (work inspections could sanction the situation of not taking the leave. However, this situation is not usual and has not been reported). The 10 remaining weeks can be taken (full or part time) over the first year on a weekly basis. Payment is 100% of earnings up to a ceiling of €4,139.40 per month. Beneficiaries will be employees or self-employed persons who are registered with the social security system and with a minimum contribution period (Meil *et al.*, 2023).

This leave has replaced the previous “maternity leave” and “paternity leave”. The old maternity leave was also 16 weeks, while the paternity leave was first introduced in 2007, with only two weeks (13 days). The equating process of both leaves began in 2007 and was completed in January 2021. Table 1 shows the chronology of this process.

Comparatively speaking, most EU countries have short paternity leave (the minimum is ten working days). This leave has been a European right since the EU Directive on Work–Life

Table 1. Equating paternity leave with maternity leave

	Weeks of maternity leave	Weeks of paternity leave ¹
March 24, 2007 ²	16	2 (13 days)
January 1, 2017	16	4
July 5, 2018 ³	16	5
April 1, 2019 ⁴	16	8
January 1, 2020	16	12
January 1, 2021	16	16

Note(s): ¹ Since April 1, 2019, the unique name of the leave is “birth and childcare leave”; ² Organic Law 3/2007, of 22 March; ³ Law 6/2018, of 3 July; ⁴ Royal Decree-Law 6/2019, of 1 March

Source(s): Table created by authors

Balance was passed in 2019, compliance with which became mandatory in 2023. However, some countries provide paid parental leave reserved for fathers, the so-called father's quota or daddy's moths, which are almost impossible to distinguish from paternity leave. They are well-paid, non-transferable parental leave exclusive for fathers. In addition to Spain, with its 16 weeks, the countries which have this kind of non-transferable well-paid parental leave, longer than two weeks, are: Iceland (4.5 months), Norway (between 17 and 21 weeks), Sweden (3 months) and Portugal (about two months). Beyond Europe, there are other cases with non-transferable paid paternity leave longer than two weeks: Québec (5 weeks) and Colombia (14 working days) (Blum *et al.*, 2023).

As regards unpaid parental leave (“Excedencia por cuidado de hijos”), each parent is entitled to take this leave until three years after childbirth. It is an individual right. During the first year, the parent's return to the same job position is protected. After the first year, job protection is restricted to a job of the same category. By its very nature, salaried employees are eligible for this, while the self-employed are not (Meil *et al.*, 2023).

As regards the rest of the existing statutory (individual) benefits, two of them are worthy of mention. First, breastfeeding leave, consisting of an hour of absence during the working day without loss of earnings, for the first nine months of the child's life. Some companies accumulate these hours into two weeks of additional company-funded leave. Second, the statutory workday reduction (in order to care for a child under the age of 12).

The uptake of the BCL is high among eligible parents (Meil *et al.*, 2023). In 2022, 73.4% of all fathers and 66.4% of all mothers used the BCL (Recio-Alcaide *et al.*, 2024). The vast majority (the 94.6%, in 2022) of mothers who use this leave use it completely and in one block, as soon as the baby is born and full time. This period is sometimes extended with two weeks of breastfeeding leave and with vacation weeks. Unlike mothers, fathers opt to use the flexibility allowed by the reform. Based on the analysis of the official registers from the Spanish Social Security (Recio-Alcaide *et al.*, 2024), among fathers who took the BCL, 49.2% used the 16 weeks simultaneously with the mother; 19.9% used it in two phases, using the 10 voluntary weeks when the mother had already returned to her work; 8.7% used less than the 10 voluntary weeks, while the remaining fathers used them in several short periods at different points in time (full or part-time).

As a consequence of being unpaid, unpaid parental leave is only used by a small number of parents, the majority of whom are women. In many cases, those who use this unpaid leave do so for a period shorter than the statutory period, usually to extend the period of leave for a few months (Dominguez-Folgueras *et al.*, 2022). In 2021, 37,354 people started a period of unpaid parental leave (Meil *et al.*, 2023). This corresponded to 11.1% of the births in that year. Fathers only accounted for 12.6% of those cases.

It is possible to affirm that in Spain, mothers and fathers eligible for BCL tend to have a high sense of entitlement to the use of this leave, while the unpaid leave is considered as something optional and of minority use, with a high opportunity cost as a consequence of being unpaid.

3. Symbolic interactionism and identity

Symbolic interactionism (Stryker, 1980, p. 15) has its origins in the American philosophy of pragmatism and in the contributions of George Herbert Mead (1934). The starting point is that human beings develop consciousness and self-consciousness. Symbolic thought (language) and the symbolic character of human communication makes it possible for human beings to be aware that things exist outside of them and that they themselves exist. That is to say, human beings have a self. However, the self is not something you are born with, but something (a story) constructed in interaction with others (Morf, 2020, p. 170).

Blumer (1969, p. 2) distinguishes between three basic premises of symbolic interactionism. First, human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that these things have for them. Second, the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with others (from the closest, the “significant others”, to the most abstract, the “generalized others”, which include culture and institutions). Third, these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things she encounters (the interaction of the person with herself, the constant internal dialogue, introspection or reflexivity).

From the interaction, the self emerges. This self, this sort of story that one makes of oneself, is composed of a series of identities. These identities never stop evolving, even if they are quite stable (Kuhn, 1964). In this regard, three types of identity can be distinguished (Burke and Stets, 2009, p. 112): Those related to roles, that is, to the fact of occupying a certain position in society, which implies the performance of a role (I am a parent, a teacher, etc.); those related to belonging to a group and those related to personal characteristics (I am “supportive”, “enterprising”, etc.).

People need to protect and verify their conceptions of who they are (Burke and Stets, 2009, p. 5). Symbolic interactionism is an approach based on “reflected appraisal”, defined as “inferences regarding others’ appraisals of us that we gain by observing other people’s reactions toward us” (Morf, 2020, p. 167). A drive that guides our behavior is to feel that we maintain a positive image of ourselves reflected in others. People immediately grasp the social context in which they find themselves and act accordingly in order to receive a positive impression of themselves through others. If I think I am a supportive person, I will tend to act in a supportive manner on any occasion conducive to this, in order to reinforce (through the gaze of others) the appraisal I have of myself. As the “identity model” of Burke and Stets (2009, p. 62) suggests, we constantly adjust our behavior (in a homeostatic or cybernetic fashion) to maintain the perception that we are consistent with what we think we are (with our identity standards).

The emergence of identities can be related to the context, or social structure, in which the individual finds herself (Serpe and Stryker, 2011). The person occupies a certain position in the social structure, which entails a certain network of relationships, from whose interactive framework identities emerge. Commitments to these identities are determined by commitments to the different spheres of this network of relationships. The degree of commitment that a person has to a given identity has its counterpart in the position of that identity in the so-called hierarchical organization of identities. This leads us to the concept of “saliency” of an identity. The higher an identity is in the hierarchy of identities, the higher its saliency, and the greater the probability that this identity will be invoked in a given situation, influencing the person’s behavior. When an identity becomes more important for the person, it can be said that it is placed in a higher position in her hierarchy of identities.

In turn, these identities are represented (dramaturgically) in the presence (real or imagined) of other people. Through his “dramaturgical analysis”, Goffman (1959) analyzes the ways in which people present their selves in social encounters (impression management). In the case of masculine identities, the focus would be on how men learn to perform manhood acts and how and why such acts vary (Schrock and Schwalbe, 2009).

To sum up, identities are composed of meanings and cognitions. They are constructed. They are formed, maintained and negotiated through interactions with others, in a context

conditioned by the position one occupies in the social structure. They often involve the performance of a role. They are activated to a greater or lesser degree, depending on their saliency. And, in the presence of others, identities are performative (for gender identity, see West and Zimmerman, 1987; Butler, 1990).

Symbolic interactionism, particularly in the recent “identity theory” version just presented, has already been used as a theoretical foundation for a few research studies on identity and father involvement, such as Goldberg (2015), Habib (2012) and Olmstead *et al.* (2009).

4. Caring masculinities and the “caregiving father” identity

Based on studies on men and masculinities and feminist care theory, Elliott (2016) theorizes about “caring masculinities”, a type of current practice by men that is gaining some importance, at least in some parts of the world. She maintains that “caring masculinities are masculine identities that reject domination and its associated traits and embrace values of care such as positive emotion, interdependence and relationality”. Likewise, she suggests that these masculinities can provide more nourishing and satisfying models of masculinity for men than hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995), with the consequent potential to change men and gender.

We want to explore the identity of what we could call the “caregiving father” (Romero-Balsas *et al.*, 2021) as a category belonging to the field of “caring masculinities”. We are referring to the figure of the “involved father”, which has received other names in the literature, such as “new father”, “superdad” (Kaufman, 2013) or “committed carers”, and which is consistent with the new social norm that fathers should get involved in the care of their newborn children (Jurado-Guerrero and Muñoz-Comet, 2021).

We seek to see to what extent the new context created by the equalization of paid parental leave may have contributed to new fathers integrating a greater degree of primary care and “caring consciousness” into their identities (Beglaubter, 2021). In this new scenario, the position that fathers occupy in the social structure changes (they are now expected to be on leave caring for their new-born children). This may foster the emergence of a network of relationships (with significant and relevant others) in which a commitment to care becomes more important. In this regard, the caregiving father identity may move up the hierarchy of identities.

Moreover, this process is intensified by a virtue of the “sense of entitlement”, to which the introduction of longer parental leave gives rise to, reinforcing the idea that having time to care for the new-born is a social right (Brandth and Kvande, 2019). In terms of symbolic interactionism, the interaction with generalized others, embodied in the State, the law and in public policies, also contributes to increase the saliency of the identity of the caregiving father.

At this point, it is worth clarifying that the exercise of fathering, or the meaning of “being a good father”, can adopt different perspectives, depending on the value people place on fatherhood. For example, a father who works 70 h a week to provide the material goods he believes his children should have (Ihinger-Tallman *et al.*, 1993), or who stresses the masculine qualities of his caregiving (Doucet, 2006; Beglaubter, 2021), may also self-perceive himself as good father. At any event, and although in some cases involved fathering can reinforce hegemonic masculinity, there is also evidence of men reworking their gender identities in ways that challenge conventional notions of manhood (Wall, 2014; Romero-Balsas *et al.*, 2021). This is the kind of caring identity we are interested in.

It has been noted that there is a need for a “social legitimacy” in the explanations fathers give for why they adopt a greater caring role (Doucet, 2006; Steinour, 2018). We suggest that the development of a caring fatherhood is accompanied by a greater sense of “being legitimized” to engage in caregiving. The question of the degree to which fathers feel legitimized (or empowered) to care will also occupy the focus of our analysis.

We assume that the new scenario created by the equalization of parental leave may be driving the emergence of the caregiving father identity. However, there is a series of contextual

factors that may intensify or dampen the legitimacy that many fathers feel they have to engage in caregiving. As will be seen further in the text, some of these contextual factors could be: a social environment, a “*zeitgeist*” of the rise of the feminist and gender equality movements; the perception that the use of a longer parental leave is a social right; the support of the workplace; the interaction and support of the couple and the importance for the father of other aspects of his personal life, beyond work and family.

There are various qualitative studies on the use of parental leave by fathers and its consequences on care and employment (for instance, [Romero-Balsas et al., 2013](#); [Duvander et al., 2017](#); [Byun and Won, 2019](#); [Reimer, 2020](#)).

There are fewer studies that explicitly address the relationship between the use of parental leave and the construction of a caring masculinity. However, four of them can be cited. [Romero-Balsas et al. \(2021\)](#) carried out a qualitative study with Spanish policemen who used parental leave to care for their babies alone while their partners returned to paid work. Their aim was to ascertain whether the use of parental leave under these circumstances favored the development of a caring fatherhood. They suggest that engagement in such practice tended to narrow the divide between traditional and caring masculinity. [Beglaubter \(2021\)](#) conducted a qualitative study with in-depth interviews with 33 Canadian fathers. Similar to [Romero-Balsas et al. \(2021\)](#), she concluded that only fathers who parented without a mother’s oversight articulated a sense of ownership and accountability over their child’s care. [Banister and Kerrane \(2022\)](#) obtain some similar results with their sample of 25 UK fathers. However, in their qualitative study with 11 Austrian couples, [Schmidt et al. \(2015\)](#) were not so optimistic. In line with the idea that the father’s wish for parental leave can also be a central element of masculinity, they consider that the construction of a “caring fatherhood” does not always fit into what [Elliott \(2016\)](#) calls “caring masculinity”.

5. Database and methodology

We carried out a qualitative study based on conducting 40 semi-structured interviews. We follow the basic methodological principles of grounded theory ([Glaser and Strauss, 1967](#); [Corbin and Strauss, 2008](#)), although we adhere somewhat more closely to [Charmaz’s \(2014\)](#) version of grounded theory.

When selecting our participants for the interviews, we were interested in the population of heterosexual fathers who had had a child from January 1, 2021 (date of equalization of leave) onwards, who cohabited with the baby’s mother, and who were salaried, since the latter theoretically have access to all forms of parental leave (BCL, unpaid parental leave, etc.). We also wanted to capture the possible different discourses that may occur among different social groups. Therefore, we tried to ensure a minimum representation of a series of typologies of fathers, according to professional status (manual, administrative, professional and managerial workers), region of residence and national origin (workers of national and foreign origin). The way to access the participants was based on the snowball sampling from the researchers’ contact networks, as well as on the establishment of contacts with some parent associations.

In order to also collect the perceptions of mothers, two interviews were conducted with mothers in addition to the 31 interviews conducted with fathers. [Table 2](#) shows the characteristics of the fathers and mothers who participated in the interviews.

In a study such as this one, it is very interesting to have employers’ perspectives as well (how do they see fathers who use the new leave and try to balance their work and family lives?). Thus, the data obtained from the parents were complemented with those obtained from interviews with seven human resources managers from companies with more than 500 employees. The characteristics of these companies are shown in [Table 3](#).

The interviews were conducted online (exceptionally, one interview was conducted face-to-face) between April 2021 and August 2022. We believe that, after the period of COVID pandemic, the Spanish population has become quite accustomed to the use of online conversations and meetings, so that this interview format no longer presents the limitations

Table 2. Characteristics of parents who participated in the interviews (31 fathers and two mothers)

Participants	Place of residence	Country of origin	Age	Date of interview	Couple	Children	Date of birth (last baby)	Company	Employment status	Type of leave
Albert	Region of Madrid	Spain	33	19/04/2021	Cohabiting	1	07/01/2021	Small family business	Administrative	16 weeks in a row
Miguel	Region of Madrid	Spain	48	22/04/2021	Married	2 (twins)	21/02/2021	University	Professional/manager	Several periods
Luis	Region of Valencia	Spain	39	26/04/2021	Married	1	05/01/2021	Food industry	Professional/manager	Part-time leave
Juan Manuel	Region of Madrid	Spain	26	28/04/2021	Cohabiting	1	26/01/2021	Industry	Professional/manager	Several periods
Lorenzo	Region of Madrid	Spain	44	19/05/2021	Cohabiting	3	09/04/2021	Industry	Manual/service worker	16 weeks in a row
Joan	Region of Madrid	Spain	37	19/05/2021	Cohabiting	1	22/02/2021	Health	Professional/manager	16 weeks in a row
Jordi	Catalonia	Spain	34	31/05/2021	Cohabiting	1	21/01/2021	Education	Professional/manager	Several periods
Daniel	Catalonia	Spain	30	02/06/2021	Married	1	20/03/2021	Consulting	Professional/manager	Several periods
Francisco	Region of Madrid	Spain	38	08/06/2021	Married	2	23/03/2021	Public admin	Professional/manager	Several periods
Andrés	Andalusia	Spain	39	14/06/2021	Married	1	10/05/2021	Banking	Professional/manager	16 weeks in a row
Pedro	Region of Madrid	Spain	36	25/06/2021	Married	3	13/05/2021	Banking	Professional/manager	Part-time leave
Jaime	Region of Madrid	Spain	55	19/07/2021	Cohabiting	3	25/03/2021	Public admin	Manual/service worker	16 weeks in a row
Jesús	Region of Madrid	Spain	38	20/07/2021	Married	2	10/04/2021	Public enterprise	Manual/service worker	Several periods
Ramón	Andalusia	Spain	34	09/09/2021	Married	2	22/02/2021	Industry	Professional/manager	Several periods

(continued)

Table 2. Continued

Participants	Place of residence	Country of origin	Age	Date of interview	Couple	Children	Date of birth (last baby)	Company	Employment status	Type of leave
Rodrigo	Basque Country	Spain	36	13/09/2021	Cohabiting	2	28/07/2021	Industry	Professional/manager	16 weeks in a row
Alejandro	Castile-Leon	Spain	34	21/09/2021	Married	1	04/07/2021	Education	Professional/manager	Several periods
Asier	Region of Madrid	Spain	35	28/09/2021	Married	1	02/01/2021	Banking	Professional/manager	Several periods
José Luis	Region of Madrid	Spain	34	29/09/2021	Married	4	23/07/2021	Consulting	Professional/manager	Less than 16 weeks
Carles	Region of Madrid	Spain	36	20/10/2021	Married	4	27/05/2021	Retail	Professional/manager	Several periods (some part-time)
Víctor	Catalonia	Romania	36	03/11/2021	Cohabiting	1	11/09/2021	University	Professional/manager	Several periods
Leandro	Castile-Leon	Spain	34	03/11/2021	Married	1	05/08/2021	Industry	Manual/service worker	16 weeks in a row
Javier	Castile-Leon	Spain	40	08/11/2021	Married	3	07/05/2021	Consulting	Professional/manager	Several periods
Antonio	Region of Madrid	Spain	35	02/11/2021	Cohabiting	2 (twins)	12/01/2021	Transportation	Manual/service worker	16 weeks in a row
Felipe	Castile-Leon	Spain	35	16/11/2021	Married	2	20/04/2021	Food industry	Professional/manager	Several periods (some part-time)
Eduard	Region of Madrid	Spain	37	22/11/2021	Married	1	06/05/2021	Banking	Professional/manager	Several periods
Luca	Castile-Leon	Spain	42	13/12/2021	Cohabiting	3	19/10/2021	Industry	Manual/service worker	Several periods
Nacho	Region of Madrid	Spain	36	04/03/2022	Married	2	03/10/2021	Tourism	Manual/service worker	16 weeks in a row
David	Region of Madrid	Spain	40	21/03/2022	Married	1	01/11/2021	Consulting	Manual/service worker	16 weeks in a row

(continued)

Table 2. Continued

Participants	Place of residence	Country of origin	Age	Date of interview	Couple	Children	Date of birth (last baby)	Company	Employment status	Type of leave
Alexis	Region of Madrid	Peru	32	26/04/2022	Cohabiting	1	28/07/2021	Retail	Manual/service worker	16 weeks in a row
Marcelino	Region of Madrid	Spain	40	27/04/2022	Married	2	30/09/2021	Insurance	Administrative	Several periods
Álvaro	Region of Madrid	Morocco	43	12/09/2022	Married	2	30/07/2022	Personal services	Manual/service worker	0 weeks
Ana	Region of Madrid	Spain	38	29/11/2021	Married	3	02/06/2021	Banking	Professional/manager	16 weeks in a row
Vanesa	Region of Madrid	Spain	33	14/02/2022	Married	1	04/10/2021	University	Administrative	16 weeks in a row

Source(s): Table created by authors

Table 3. Characteristics of HR managers who participated in the interviews

	Sector	Number of employees	Date of interview
César, HR manager	Legal services	500–1,000	30/04/2021
Almudena, HR manager	Consultancy	>1,000	30/04/2021
Mari Carmen, HR manager	Industry	500–1,000	09/06/2021
Katinka, HR manager	Computing	>1,000	11/06/2021
Manuel, HR manager	Health	>1,000	02/07/2021
Natalia, HR manager	Banking	>1,000	10/12/2021
Vicente, HR manager	Retail	500–1,000	04/01/2022

Source(s): Table created by authors

that it used to present with respect to the face-to-face format. Interview durations were in the range of half an hour to two hours. All participants were previously informed of the purpose of the research and gave informed consent at the beginning of the interview recordings. To preserve the anonymity of the participants, fictitious names are used and reference is only made to the sector of the company in which they work, without providing details about the company.

The interviews were transcribed into text. From these transcriptions, a first phase of initial coding was carried out, in which concepts and “incidents” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 128) were coded. This was an open coding, in which new concepts or codes emerged. From this initial coding, we moved on to another phase of focused coding, where, through the study and comparison of the initial codes, it was decided to divide some of them or merge several of them into one, which emerged as categories or variables of analysis, in a continuous process of “back and forth”. In this process, some possible “core variables” or “core categories” emerged (it is worth highlighting here the “legitimacy to exercise care” as a core category). We performed a theoretical sampling, seeking pertinent new data (conducting additional interviews) to develop our emerging explanation; therefore, interviews were conducted throughout the research, until we considered that a reasonable degree of saturation in the properties of our categories was reached. Memos (notes, drafts and network of linked concepts) were written throughout the research process and were shared in periodic meetings held by the research team. We used ATLAS.ti 22 software.

6. Results

Table 4 shows an outline of the results obtained in our study. On the one hand, the new scenario created by the equalization of parental leave may be making it easier for fathers to feel more legitimized to provide primary care. This experience of feeling legitimacy seems to us to be the core category of our analysis. On the other hand, we consider that the more intense this experience of legitimacy is, the more intense the emergence of the caregiving father identity could be and the fact that it has a greater saliency with respect to the rest of the identities.

As can also be seen in Table 4, we identified five categories (focused coding) that could act as moderating variables of this process: they may intensify or lessen the positive effect of the equalization of parental leave on the feeling of having legitimacy to care. In turn, each of these five categories was derived (emerged) from 19 concepts identified in the initial coding process.

6.1 Equalization of parental leave and caregiving father identity

In conversations with fathers, there are often allusions associated with the new identity of a caregiving father in a context of equalization of leave.

(Andrés/39/banking/professional-manager)

Table 4. Main categories identified in our analysis

Initial coding (concepts)	Focused coding (categories)	Core category	Dependent variable
Gender attitudes Attitudes toward fatherhood “I am entitled”	Social norm favorable to father involvement (feminist zeitgeist)	Greater legitimacy to provide primary care	Father caregiver identity
Working in unionized sector/occupation Attitude of the media, etc. Interaction with co-workers Interaction with bosses Role model Corporate culture The ideal worker image Career and promotion Helper father Caring alone Breastfeeding and biological essentialism Maternal gatekeeping Division of labor	Social right (to use a long leave) Support of the work environment Support of the couple		
Influence of relatives Influence of friends	Personal life (beyond work and family)		

Source(s): Table created by authors

For me, it has made me a better person, I am very happy. I consider that there are some very beautiful months ahead, very hard, but very beautiful, and I don't want to miss a single minute of time with my little girl.

This happens both with first-time fathers, such as Andrés, and with fathers who did not have the same opportunities to exercise caregiving with previous children, such as Ramón (34/industry/professional-manager).

It is true that, right now, with this one I am experiencing many things that I missed with the other one (. . .) So, this first stage, which I am now experiencing first hand, and on top of that with paternity leave, I missed out on before and there is honestly no comparison. So, there is no comparison in terms being able to give my son of quality time, and I'm sure he will see it in the long run and will be grateful for it.

In these moments of access to fatherhood, the identity of the caregiving father becomes more salient. This ascent in the hierarchy of identities is evident when the identity of the father is emphasized with respect to the identities of worker, provider or ideal worker (Blair-Loy, 2003).

The identity of the caregiving father is also expressed by highlighting the need to be there in the “ungrateful” moments of caregiving, as Jaime (55/public administration/manual-service worker) does:

Man, those years back then were very different; we underwent them in a different way and I never stopped working a day with either of the two girls (. . .). I don't know if I had a bad night, I can't tell you, I mean, I don't remember, but now I have lived through it. I have been living through it, as we both are [bad nights], day after day.

The experience, or phenomenological experience, of feeling that one is a caregiving father is reinforced and legitimized by virtue of the provision of longer leave. This is what seems to be

conveyed by the above statements, most of which refer to this greater availability of time for caregiving. The same is expressed by Miguel (48/university/professional-manager):

The girls are clearly part of our lives and I believe that these 10 weeks have been fundamental for us. In fact, the idea of the woman staying at home to take care of the girls and the man having two days of leave and then going to work, already sounds like an anachronism . . . It was so absurd, so old-fashioned (. . .). It seems like an anachronism we were left with from another era, not from this era.

6.2 *Feminist zeitgeist and social norms favorable to the father's involvement*

Miguel's statement above also reflects the change in gender norms that has been taking place for decades in Spain. This process has been accelerated in recent years in line with the rise of the feminist movement in Spain and around the world. One expression of this is the "8M" movement that has emerged since 2018. This has led to the sensitivity toward gender equality permeating all areas of society today, to the point of being able to speak of a "feminist zeitgeist" (Beyer *et al.*, 2020). One of the areas in which the equality discourse has taken hold is that of equality in caregiving, and this can be seen in the following statement by Asier (35/banking/professional-manager):

I believe that my environment also sees it [equalization of leave] as something very positive, as something necessary, above all for the issue of equality; that is to say, that at a professional level both men and women can have the same opportunities, and the fact that a woman can become pregnant and take a long leave is not prejudicial at a professional level (. . .).

The transmission of these more egalitarian gender norms is reflected in the interactions of the participants in this study with people around them (relevant others). An example of this could be the following statements made by Jesús (38/public enterprise/manual-service worker):

Those comments when you talk about what happened with the children or whatever, and they said: "no, my wife"; "my wife is in charge". It's not the same anymore (. . .) What you hear now has nothing to do with what you heard 5 or 6 years ago.

The commitment that participants tend to express to these egalitarian attitudes in caregiving may be a factor that reinforces the positive effect of the equalization of parental leave on the feeling of being legitimized to engage in caregiving.

In any case, this context of changing gender norms does not mean that traditional gender attitudes have totally disappeared. For example, in several cases, reflections are made that highlight the attitude of subordinating her career to his:

(Nacho/36/tourism/Manual-service worker)

(. . .) She has had to take a half-day job and may have to stop working because there is no way she can do it . . .

(Carles/36/retail/professional-manager)

(. . .) She loves it, she loves what she does, she is also aware that continuing to grow in science is not feasible with everything it implies, because in the end it would involve many hours of dedication to science, and she is not willing to give them and it would not be viable for the balance at home.

In these two cases we are dealing with fathers (of medium-low and high socio-economic status, respectively) whose partners have professional careers comparable with theirs. However, neither of them contemplates the possibility of being the one to give up work in order to have more time for caregiving.

6.3 *The use of parental leave as a social right*

Having a new, longer leave that is equal to that of the mother also gives rise to a "sense of entitlement" among fathers. This sense consists of a series of beliefs or feelings about having

rights to something based on what is understood as fair and equitable (Brandth and Kvande, 2019). Javier's statement seems to be along these lines.

(Javier/40/consulting/professional-manager)

(. . .) And they [his friends] say that "I have won the lottery" because now I have 10 weeks. But I . . . , because I am entitled to it, ask for it, just like that.

Faced with the doubts, or the feeling of having little legitimacy, that the comments of his friends may arouse in him, Javier invokes the legitimacy that comes from using something to which he is entitled. The "I am entitled" is not only a direct motivation to use the new leave, but also interacts with the other factors discussed here, facilitating the emergence of a feeling of having legitimacy to care. This "I am entitled" is likely to be stronger in more unionized work environments, where more emphasis is placed on social rights. The media and social media (an important "generalized others"), which in Spain tend to have a favorable attitude toward the "new fathers", may also be encouraging this aspect.

6.4 Support of the work environment

Support from the work environment for the use of parental leave and other work-life balance measures is a very important factor that can help fathers feel legitimized to devote themselves to caregiving. Workers spend a very significant part of their time in the work environment, where they interact with colleagues, bosses and subordinates (Mathieu et al., 2023; Clark et al., 2017). In this environment, there is often a tension or conflict between loyalty to the organization and to the ideal worker image and loyalty to personal and family life. The construction of the caregiving father identity may be strongly influenced by the content of these interactions and by the type of "culture" that emanates from them.

The existence of this tension between the concept of the ideal worker and the need to have time for caregiving is quite well-reflected in this statement by Andrés (39, banking, professional/manager):

"The bogeyman is coming!" That is a bit of a bogeyman. If the company considers that because I am on parental leave it is a sign that I am not a model employee, then we have a problem.

Moreover, in some organizations, the care provided by fathers (and the time off work that it requires) may be perceived as less important than that provided by mothers. Examples of this are the observations by Mari Carmen, an HR manager:

Maternity, well, it seems to me, personally, that it is not the same . . . four months like the mother, well, there is no recovery like the mother needs, he doesn't have to breastfeed, he doesn't have to, right? I think the needs are not the same. (. . .) That is to say, we want equality, yes, equality, but not that the cost should always be for the company (. . .).

Underlying these reflections is the fact that baby care is given a lower status when it is provided by a male caregiver. This type of meaning given to male caregiving can clearly influence the degree to which men feel legitimized to provide care. On the other hand, as indicated by most of the fathers interviewed, the support and value given to the care they provide critically depends on the boss they have been assigned. In this regard, most of the fathers interviewed say that they have had a supportive boss and peers.

The lower status of childcare when performed by a man is also evidenced by the fact that there are some fathers who use the voluntary part of the BCL (10 weeks) in several short periods at different points in time (full or part-time), depending on the needs of the company, while this practice is very rare among mothers (almost all take it in one block). This greater willingness on the part of some fathers to subordinate the time they devote to caregiving to the pace of the company's activity may be telling of the secondary value given to paternal care. Felipe's recounting of how he and his female partner took their leave may reflect this:

(Felipe/35/food industry/professional-manager)

I'll tell you about it. Her case is very easy, she took it all in a row, the four months, the 16 weeks, plus breastfeeding, plus the vacation she had; she took it all in a row; while I took the mandatory six weeks at the beginning, then when she finished I took another three weeks more, and this week I'm actually enjoying my leave (. . .). I'm taking it a bit at a time depending on the company's production . . .

Another important aspect is the existence of role models in the company. For example, with regard to the full use of parental leave, it was important for Eduard (37/banking/professional-manager) to see that other fathers in his company had already taken their full parental leave:

I have some friends in the bank who took their entire leave and that helped me to take my leave without any fear, because I have seen that nothing happens.

The existence of such role models in his company makes it easier for Eduard to normalize the fact that fathers take longer leaves to devote themselves to caregiving.

Although in most cases the fathers interviewed state that they have felt supported by their companies, even among the fathers in this group there may be a perception that using longer parental leave may negatively affect their career advancement. This is the case of Marcelino (40/insurance/administrative), for example:

The thing is that, well, it is true that some promotions may be announced, or a certain project may be announced at the time when I am on leave and, let's say, that cannot wait.

6.5 Support of the couple

As important as the company's support in the workplace is the support of the partner (the main "significant other") in interactions at home. We have observed that many fathers do not see themselves as primary caregivers of the infant. During the first few months of the baby's life, these fathers see the mother as the primary caregiver and they tend to see themselves more as helping parents. Sometimes fathers try to make sense of this perception by invoking essentialist arguments. In addition, at times, some mothers may engage in "gatekeeping" behavior that reinforces this type of dynamic. This feeling of being a "helper parent", especially during the first few months of the baby's life, is an aspect that negatively affects the feeling of being legitimized to be a baby's primary caregiver. However, some very convinced fathers, as well as some who care alone when the mother has already returned to work, may neutralize this effect.

Jesús (38/public enterprise/manual-service worker), an involved father who has turned down a career promotion in order to have more time to care, reveals in the following reflection how he sees himself in the role of a helper father, at least during the first weeks after the birth:

I think that the more time the father has, the better, because the more you will be able to help. That is clear, because, in the end, the mother during the first few months, whatever it sounds like, has to dedicate 90% to the child and 10% to her. 90% to the child because, in the end, she has to breastfeed, she cannot do anything else . . . So there has to be someone to help, there has to be someone to keep on doing things.

This is consistent with the observation that mothers are usually the ones who organize, supervise and take responsibility for the baby's care, at least during the first few months. A very expressive example of this is provided by Ana (38/banking/professional-manager). She, who has just returned to work, describes how she leaves everything ready and tidy for her husband to take care of the baby while she is at the office.

He [the baby] already takes a bottle, I am introducing complementary feeding. So, I leave everything very tidy for him [the father], with his feedings every six hours, his food prepared, his naps more or less regular. So yes, he can take care of the child quite comfortably . . .

When it comes to making sense of these aspects, some parents, like Ramón (34/industry/professional-manager), use essentialist arguments:

There are things that we carry inside, and it is true that I do not carry fatherhood as intrinsically as work responsibility, let's put it that way. It is something that comes naturally (. . .) I think that, in the end, because of their natural way of being, women have a predisposition to carry that burden or that family stress better than men, and *vice versa* with the workload.

Several interviews revealed the view that the father's role in caregiving increases in importance several months after the birth of the baby, in many cases, after the breastfeeding period. This belief is also an important factor that can negatively affect the feeling of having legitimacy to care during the first few months of the baby's life, an aspect that can affect the construction of the caregiving father identity that is taking place at that time.

18 of the 31 fathers interviewed took the BCL in tranches. Most of them took the 10 voluntary weeks once the mother had returned to work (in some cases some additional weeks were added, for example, using the vacation period). The literature (Beglaubter, 2021) points out that the fact of caring alone while the mother works makes it possible to overcome some of the barriers to the construction of a caring fatherhood that we have just discussed. The reflections of Alejandro (34/education/professional-manager) point in this direction.

You are the one who is left alone. Because, of course, as long as you are in the shadow, you are doing auxiliary work. But there comes a time when you come to the forefront because you are alone and logically you are the one who makes decisions, the one who goes for a walk and, therefore, prepares things and is aware of the hours, the feedings, the diapers . . .

We have observed that throughout the period during which the interviews were conducted, the number of fathers who use the two-part parental leave has been increasing. Perhaps there has been a certain "learning effect", in the sense that the idea that this option is the most interesting (because it makes it possible to extend the period during which the baby is cared for exclusively by the parents) has been transmitted in the interactions between the parents.

6.6 Interactions with other people

Interactions with other people (who are also significant or relevant others), beyond the work environment and the couple, can also have an important influence on the construction of a caring parenthood.

Some participants transmitted to us several observations from their friends or neighbors that show that the change in gender social norms is not always linear and that there is a certain inertia of the norms related to the traditional gender division of labor. Ramón's statement points in this direction:

(Ramón/34/industry/professional-manager)

But with friends or neighbors that you meet at the swimming pool, etc., they say, "oh hey, how are you doing, how are the vacations going?". And I say, "no, excuse me, no vacation at all, I am looking forward to going back to work at certain times, I am doing more work now in many regards".

The incomprehension of these friends and neighbors is another example (similar to the one mentioned above on the part of some HR managers) of attitudes that tend to devalue the father's caregiving work and delegitimize his status as a caregiver.

However, in the opposite direction, Ramón also shows us the positive influence, or role model, of another friend:

He, like me, has now taken the second period of paternity leave and says, "I'm not going to take the child to daycare until November because I want to live the experience of my child, I want to be with him and take care of him." So, we are in a very similar situation.

Finally, we have observed that for some fathers the type of relationship they had with their father is also important; some emphasize the importance of being a father caregiver because

they had a father who was also involved in their care; others want to be father caregivers in order not to repeat the mistakes of their fathers.

7. Discussion and conclusion

After analyzing the results of the 40 interviews, we conclude that the recent equalization of fathers' leave with mothers' leave in Spain has brought about an important change in the attitudes and worldviews of fathers who have had a child following this policy change. Through their interactions with (significant, relevant and generalized) others in their corresponding networks of relationships, these fathers have been shaped by this new system of norms and at the same time have acted as agents of this change. We believe that there has been a rapid acceptance and normalization of the use of these new equalized leaves. This has been accompanied by the experience of a greater sense of "being legitimized" to engage in caregiving. The latter has provided an impetus to the development of a caring fatherhood; that is, it has contributed to increase the saliency of the identity of the caregiving father.

However, the intensity of the above process may have been dampened by the persistence of traditional gender attitudes and essentialist beliefs, which manifest themselves in three ways. First, the devaluation of the status of the father caregiver (compared with the mother caregiver) by significant and relevant others, with whom fathers interact, in the work environment, in the family and in the realm of friends and other acquaintances.

Second, the tendency of fathers to assume the role of the mother's helper (in the care of the baby) during the first few months of the baby's life, which is when the father-caregiver identity begins to be constructed.

And third, the practice of either using the 16 weeks of leave in a row and simultaneously with the mother, or using these weeks in several short periods at different points in time (full or part time) depending on the needs of the company (see [Amjahad et al., 2023](#), on how companies attempt to negotiate with their workers who have become fathers regarding the timing of the take-up of leave). The consequence, in both cases, is to reinforce the figure of the helper father and the traditional gender division of labor (the mother relatively focused on care, the father relatively focused on work).

One sign of the existence of these aspects, that can lower the saliency of the father caregiver identity, is that the fathers in our sample make less use (than mothers) of other ways to extend leave (weeks of vacation, unpaid leave, etc.), and, in addition, once they return to work, they make less use of other work-life balance measures, such as, for example, reduced working hours.

In turn, the above three negative effects could be offset by the following three aspects that may have a positive influence on the feeling of legitimacy of being a father caregiver. First, the continuation of the development of both the feminist *zeitgeist* and the "role model" effect derived from seeing fathers doing primary care, which would result in a social normalization of this practice of caring masculinity.

Second, the "sense of entitlement" to use longer leave (and to be involved in the care of the baby) that many fathers feel, which comes from the fact that a new law equalizing leave has been passed. In this regard, it can be said that "the law exemplifies", in a sense quite similar to what [Bilz and Nadler \(2009\)](#) call "the law as a moral anchor".

And third, the spread (among fathers) of the practice of using leave in two separate periods, the mandatory six weeks immediately after the birth of the baby plus 10 voluntary weeks after the mother returns to paid work. This model usually allows the father to care for his baby alone, with the positive consequences that this entails in terms of generating an attachment and a more involved parenting ([Beglaubter, 2021](#); [Castrillo et al., 2021](#); [Bünning, 2015](#); [Wall, 2014](#)).

In short, the development of a caring fatherhood could be subject to two opposing forces that can either slow it down or enhance it forward. Whether this ambivalence is resolved in favor of advancement could depend on how successful public policy is in this area. In general, the recommendations drawn from our research could be twofold: First, the reforms of parental

leave systems should encourage men to take on solo care (for as long as possible). In the case of Spain, if the first weeks of leave that parents are legally obliged to use simultaneously were reduced from six to two, many fathers would later use 14 weeks to care for the baby alone while the mother works, instead of the current 10. Second, such reform measures should be accompanied by awareness-raising campaigns that provide information to companies and parents about the advantages of this use of non-transferable paid leave, which, among other things, encourages greater co-responsibility in care between mothers and fathers.

The present study has limitations that provide avenues for future research. First, the sample may be limited in representativeness. Although a qualitative study is not intended to be statistically representative, we tried to have a minimum representation of a series of typologies of fathers. However, the sample of participants may have been relatively skewed toward professional and urban parents. In addition, our sample only includes wage earners, leaving out self-employed fathers. In a similar vein, we have not sufficiently explored the interactions between the aspects studied in this article and the socioeconomic and class status of the fathers. There is considerable scope for future research on these topics.

References

- Amjahad, A., Valentova, M. and Maas, R. (2023), "How do employers respond to a policy reform of parental leave? A focus on fathers and companies from economy sectors with traditionally lower take-up rates", *Journal of Family Issues*, Vol. 44 No. 12, pp. 3089-3116, doi: [10.1177/0192513x221126751](https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513x221126751).
- Banister, E. and Kerrane, B. (2022), "Glimpses of change? UK fathers navigating work and care within the context of Shared Parental Leave", *Gender, Work and Organization*, Vol. 31 No. 4, pp. 1-16, doi: [10.1111/gwao.12813](https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12813).
- Beglauter, J. (2021), "I feel like it's a little bit of a badge of honor': fathers' leave-taking and the development of caring masculinities", *Men and Masculinities*, Vol. 24 No. 1, pp. 3-22, doi: [10.1177/1097184x19874869](https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184x19874869).
- Beyer, H., Lach, M. and Schnabel, A. (2020), "The cultural code of antifeminist communication: voicing opposition to the 'Feminist Zeitgeist'", *Acta Sociologica*, Vol. 63 No. 2, pp. 209-225, doi: [10.1177/0001699318789218](https://doi.org/10.1177/0001699318789218).
- Bilz, K. and Nadler, J. (2009), "Law, psychology, and morality", in Bartels, D.M., Bauman, C.W., Skitka, L.J. and Medin, D.L. (Eds), *Moral Judgment and Decision Making*, Elsevier, New York, NY, pp. 101-131.
- Blair-Loy, M. (2003), *Competing Devotions: Career and Family Among Women Executives*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Blum, S., Dobrotić, I., Kaufman, G., Koslowski, A. and Moss, P. (2023), "International review of leave policies and research 2023", available at: http://www.leavenetwork.org/lp_and_r_reports/.
- Blumer, H. (1969), "Symbolic interactionism", in *Perspective and Method*, University of California Press, Los Angeles, CA.
- Brandth, B. and Kvande, E. (2019), "Workplace support of fathers' parental leave use in Norway", *Community, Work and Family*, Vol. 22 No. 1, pp. 43-57, doi: [10.1080/13668803.2018.1472067](https://doi.org/10.1080/13668803.2018.1472067).
- Bünning, M. (2015), "What happens after the 'daddy months'? Fathers' involvement in paid work, childcare, and housework after taking parental leave in Germany", *European Sociological Review*, Vol. 31 No. 6, pp. 738-748, doi: [10.1093/esr/jcv072](https://doi.org/10.1093/esr/jcv072).
- Burke, P. and Stets, J.E. (2009), *Identity Theory*, Oxford University Press, New York, NY.
- Butler, J. (1990), *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge, New York, NY.
- Byun, S. and Won, S. (2019), "Are they ideological renegades? Fathers' experiences on taking parental leave and gender dynamics in Korea: a qualitative study", *Gender, Work and Organization*, Vol. 27 No. 4, pp. 592-614, doi: [10.1111/gwao.12410](https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12410).

-
- Castrillo, C., Rogero-García, J., Romero-Balsas, P. and Meil, G. (2021), "Becoming primary caregivers? Unemployed fathers caring alone in Spain", *Families, Relationships and Societies*, Vol. 10 No. 3, pp. 517-533, doi: [10.1332/204674320x15919852635855](https://doi.org/10.1332/204674320x15919852635855).
- Charmaz, K. (2014), *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 2nd ed., Sage, Dorchester, GB.
- Clark, M.A., Rudolph, C.W., Zhdanova, L., Michel, J.S. and Baltes, B.B. (2017), "Organizational support factors and work-family outcomes: exploring gender differences", *Journal of Family Issues*, Vol. 38 No. 11, pp. 1520-1545, doi: [10.1177/0192513x15585809](https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513x15585809).
-
- Connell, R.W. (1995), *Masculinities*, 2nd ed., University of California Press, Berkeley, CA.
- Corbin, J. and Strauss, A. (2008), *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*, 3rd ed., Sage, Thousand Oak, CA.
- Domínguez-Folgueras, M., González, M.J. and Lapuerta, I. (2022), "The motherhood penalty in Spain: the effect of full- and part-time parental leave on women's earnings", *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State and Society*, Vol. 29 No. 1, pp. 164-189, doi: [10.1093/sp/jxab046](https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxab046).
- Doucet, A. (2006), *Do Men Mother? Fathering, Care, and Domestic Responsibility*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, ON.
- Duvander, A.-Z., Haas, L.A. and Thalberg, S. (2017), "Fathers on leave alone in Sweden: toward more equal parenthood?", in O'Brien, M. and Wall, K. (Eds), *Comparative Perspectives on Work-Life Balance and Gender Equality. Fathers on Leave Alone*, Springer Open, pp. 125-145.
- Elliott, K. (2016), "Caring masculinities: theorizing an emerging concept", *Men and Masculinities*, Vol. 19 No. 3, pp. 240-259, doi: [10.1177/1097184x15576203](https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184x15576203).
- Glaser, B.G. and Strauss, A.L. (1967), *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, Aldine, New Brunswick, NJ.
- Goffman, E. (1959), *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Doubleday, New York, NY.
- Goldberg, J.S. (2015), "Identity and involvement among resident and nonresident fathers", *Journal of Family Issues*, Vol. 36 No. 7, pp. 852-879, doi: [10.1177/0192513x13500963](https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513x13500963).
- Habib, C. (2012), "The transition to fatherhood: a literature review exploring paternal involvement with identity theory", *Journal of Family Studies*, Vol. 18 Nos 2-3, pp. 103-120, doi: [10.5172/jfs.2012.18.2-3.103](https://doi.org/10.5172/jfs.2012.18.2-3.103).
- Hook, J.L. (2006), "Care in context: men's unpaid work in 20 countries, 1965-2003", *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 71 No. 4, pp. 639-660, doi: [10.1177/000312240607100406](https://doi.org/10.1177/000312240607100406).
- Ihinger-Tallman, M., Pasley, K. and Buehler, C. (1993), "Developing a middle-range theory of father involvement postdivorce", *Journal of Family Issues*, Vol. 14 No. 4, pp. 550-571, doi: [10.1177/019251393014004005](https://doi.org/10.1177/019251393014004005).
- Jurado-Guerrero, T. and Muñoz-Comet, J. (2021), "Design matters most: changing social gaps in the use of fathers' leave in Spain", *Population Research and Policy Review*, Vol. 40 No. 3, pp. 589-615, doi: [10.1007/s11113-020-09592-w](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11113-020-09592-w).
- Kaufman, G. (2013), *Superdads, How Fathers Balance Work and Family in the 21st Century*, University Press, New York, NY.
- Kaufman, G. (2020), *Fixing Parental Leave. The Six Month Solution*, New York University Press, New York, NY.
- Kuhn, M.H. (1964), "Major trends in symbolic interaction theory in the past twenty-five years", *The Sociological Quarterly*, Vol. 5 No. 1, pp. 61-84, doi: [10.1111/j.1533-8525.1964.tb02256.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1533-8525.1964.tb02256.x).
- Mathieu, S., Tremblay, D.G., Treleaven, C. and Fuller, S. (2023), "Determinants of work-family balance satisfaction during the pandemic: insights from Québec", *Canadian Review of Sociology/Revue canadienne de sociologie*, Vol. 60 No. 2, pp. 212-228, doi: [10.1111/cars.12427](https://doi.org/10.1111/cars.12427).
- Mead, G.H. (1934), *Mind, Self, and Society*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, IL.
- Meil, G., Escobedo, A. and Lapuerta, I. (2023), "Spain country note", in Blum, S., Dobrotić, I., Kaufman, G., Koslowski, A. and Moss, P. (Eds), *International Review of Leave Policies and Research 2023*, available at: http://www.leavenetwork.org/lp_and_r_reports/

- Morf, C.C. (2020), "The self", in Hewstone, M. and Stroebe, W. (Eds), *An Introduction to Social Psychology*, Wiley Blackwell, Toronto.
- Olmstead, S.B., Futris, T.G. and Pasley, K. (2009), "An exploration of married and divorced, nonresident men's perceptions and organization of their father role identity", *Fathering: A Journal of Theory, Research, and Practice about Men as Fathers*, Vol. 7 No. 3, pp. 249-268, doi: [10.3149/fth.0703.249](https://doi.org/10.3149/fth.0703.249).
- Recio-Alcaide, A., Castellanos-Serrano, C. and Andrés-Jiménez, J. (2024), "Cómo incide el nuevo diseño de los permisos de nacimiento en la corresponsabilidad: Un análisis con registros administrativos de la Seguridad Social de 2016 a 2023", *Papeles de trabajo del Instituto de Estudios Fiscales. Serie economía*. 4/2024, pp. 1-90, available at: https://www.ief.es/docs/destacados/publicaciones/papeles_trabajo/2024_04.pdf.
- Reimer, T. (2020), "Why fathers don't take more parental leave in Germany: comparing mechanisms in different work organizations", *Community, Work and Family*, Vol. 23 No. 4, pp. 419-438, doi: [10.1080/13668803.2019.1608157](https://doi.org/10.1080/13668803.2019.1608157).
- Romero-Balsas, P., Muntanyola-Saura, D. and Rogero-García, J. (2013), "Decision-making factors within paternity and parental leaves: why Spanish fathers take time off from work", *Gender, Work and Organization*, Vol. 20 No. 6, pp. 678-691, doi: [10.1111/gwao.12004](https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12004).
- Romero-Balsas, P., Meil, G. and Rogero-García, J. (2021), "Policemen on leave alone in Spain. A rift in hegemonic masculinity?", *Men and Masculinities*, Vol. 24 No. 3, pp. 483-500, doi: [10.1177/1097184x19878221](https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184x19878221).
- Schmidt, E.M., Rieder, I., Zartler, U., Schadler, C. and Richter, R. (2015), "Parental constructions of masculinity at the transition to parenthood: the division of parental leave among Austrian couples", *International Review of Sociology*, Vol. 25 No. 3, pp. 373-386, doi: [10.1080/03906701.2015.1078532](https://doi.org/10.1080/03906701.2015.1078532).
- Schrock, D. and Schwalbe, M. (2009), "Men, masculinity, and manhood acts", *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 35 No. 1, pp. 277-295, doi: [10.1146/annurev-soc-070308-115933](https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-070308-115933).
- Serpe, R.T. and Stryker, S. (2011), "The symbolic interactionist perspective and identity theory", in Schwartz, S.J., Luyckx, K. and Vignoles, V.L. (Eds), *Handbook of Identity Theory and Research*, Springer, New York, NY, pp. 225-248.
- Steinour, H. (2018), "'I am not Mr. Mom': a qualitative analysis of at-home father's struggle for legitimacy", *Journal of Gender Studies*, Vol. 27 No. 4, pp. 388-400, doi: [10.1080/09589236.2016.1220290](https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2016.1220290).
- Stryker, S. (1980), *Symbolic Interactionism*, The Blackburn Press, Caldwell, NJ.
- Wall, K. (2014), "Fathers on leave alone: does it make a difference to their lives?", *Fathering*, Vol. 12 No. 2, pp. 196-210.
- West, C. and Zimmerman, D. (1987), "Doing gender", *Gender and Society*, Vol. 1 No. 2, pp. 125-151, doi: [10.1177/0891243287001002002](https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243287001002002).

Corresponding author

José Andrés Fernández-Cornejo can be contacted at: joaferna@ucm.es