

The Triad of Work Cultural Elements Leading to Fathers' Sense of Entitlement to Taking Time off for Childcare:

A Comparative Approach to Korean Fathers' Experiences in Swedish-owned Companies and Korean-owned Companies in Sweden

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Introduction

Fathers' active involvement in childcare has recently become a major policy interest in many welfare states. To encourage fathers' hands-on childcare, institutional measures have primarily revolved around guaranteeing the legal right to take time off with no repercussions, e.g., paternity leave, parental leave, flexible work arrangements (Moss & Deven, 2015). Based on time-off policies, fathers as much as mothers have in theory become entitled to intermingle their childcare responsibilities with their work duties. Since the 1970s, the Nordic welfare states have been leading the pursuit for equal parenthood by introducing the most generous benefits (Eydal & Rostgaard, 2016). For instance, Sweden was the first country to introduce parental leave for fathers, fathers now get 77.6 % of their salary for 390 days (shared with the partner) with a cap of about 4,000 USD (Duvander & Haas, 2018).

Despite the findings that such time-off policies justify fathers' absences at work, little research has concluded that the establishment of the policies can directly link to an increase in fathers' actual sense of entitlement (see Gatrell & Cooper, 2016; Hobson, Fahlén, & Takács, 2014; Lewis, 1997). The institutional approaches often presume that a right given will be a right used; accordingly, whether or not one utilizes the measures available to them is often likely to remain entirely dependent upon the individual father's choice. However, this approach overlooks individualized circumstances that may not be actually favorable for exercising one's legal rights. This loose relation can also be found in the sluggish rate of increase in parental leave taken by fathers; a pattern present even in Nordic welfare states during the first few decades (see Haataja, 2009).

Fathers have been long expected to live up to a social formula that equates a good father with a competent provider (Lupton & Barclay, 1997). This formula has in part forced them to focus more on work and success therein at the expense of time with their children at home (Levine & Pittinsky, 1997). In order to overthrow the long-standing formula, the legal right to take time off and their individual desire to be a more involved father alone are not likely to

be sufficient triggers. A father's caring practices and level of involvement in childcare are made based on not only his personal desire and legal rights, but also manifold obligations that have been socially and culturally required by his workplace.

The workplace, a space which has been often overlooked in policy research, is a crucial intersection where one's legal right to time-off policies is realized into visible practice (Haas & Hwang, 2009; Holter, 2007). The pursuit of involved fatherhood is often inversely proportional to the length of one's time at work; since a good father nowadays is required to be present in their children's lives as much as mothers, for births, illnesses, holidays, and special events. Therefore, in the companies that require employees' constant commitment and an adjustable schedule for work, a father's sense of entitlement to take time off for childcare will likely have evolved differently from that of those in workplaces that emphasize a more employee-friendly management style based on prescribed job descriptions and an autonomous work arrangement. Furthermore, sociocultural norms on work, care, time, and relationships embedded in a community or a larger society intertwine with the workplace culture (Hobson, 2013; Holmquist & Boter, 2004). With a growing number of multinational companies and immigrants working in other countries, it becomes particularly important to extend the attention given to the structure of national policies over to how such sociocultural aspects of the work organization can steer individual fathers' perceptions towards taking time off for their children in their daily work life.

Accordingly, this research aims to illuminate how the sociocultural practices at work have a greater impact than the generous policies in Sweden on fathers' sense of entitlement to take time off for childcare. In order to gain more contextualized insights on the work cultural impact beyond the policies, the author recruited two different groups of Korean fathers working in Sweden: One group works at Korean-owned multinational companies with branches operating in Sweden, e.g., Samsung, LG, KIA, and the other works at Swedish-owned multinational companies, e.g., Ericsson, Volvo. The fathers have work experience in South Korea which is well-known for long working hours, hierarchical work organizations, and a relationship-driven work culture (Cho & Yoon, 2001; Kee, 2008; Kim, McLean, & Park, 2018). Breaking free from a work-oriented life, the fathers have chosen to work in Sweden to pursue a better kind of fatherhood. Cross-cultural studies in policy research are generally conducted based on the comparison of similar or dissimilar points in more than two countries (van Oorschot, 2007). However, this study focuses on how fathers from the Korean work culture adjust their sense of entitlement to fatherhood depending on the dominant practices of their workplace under the same Swedish policy system. Through this approach, the author aims to view taken-for-granted work practices in Swedish companies from a

distance and reveal what sociocultural aspects exist and how these interactions can implicitly affect fathers' development of their sense of entitlement to take time off in their daily life.

Methods and Interviewees

This study makes use of a qualitative methodology based on in-depth interviews. A semi-structured questionnaire was used. The questions mostly fell into seven categories: socio-demographic information, reasons for coming to Sweden, characteristics of current and previous jobs (e.g. work hours, the pattern of work allocation, adjusting work schedule, work overtime, etc.), current and previous relationships at work (e.g. between colleagues, with managers and employers), current and previous personal experiences of making use of time-off policies, if any (e.g. paternity leave, parental leave, sick child leave, etc.), personal thoughts and desires on the roles of employee and father, current and previous personal strategies for work-family balance. Before the interview, all participants were informed of the research topic, a brief synopsis of the types of questions involved, and a guarantee of confidentiality and anonymity.

Sixteen full-time working fathers and ten of their female colleagues were interviewed. The participants were recruited through snowball sampling from two groups from Stockholm and Lund, Sweden: a group working at Swedish companies in Sweden, e.g., Volvo, Ericsson and those working at Korean-owned companies with branches operating in Sweden, e.g., Samsung, LG, KIA. Fathers were the key to this study, but the interviews with female employees helped me broaden my understanding of the overall work environment and of male employees' experiences that were left unspoken during the interviews with the fathers. The socio-demographic information of the father interviewees follows in Appendix 1.

The Fathers Who Chose Family Time over a Higher Income

All the fathers are in their late 30s and 40 and have one to three children, between the ages of 6 months and 14 years old. They had previously worked in South Korea before coming to Sweden. All the families were better off financially in Korea since most of the wives had full-time jobs before moving to Sweden. The families are all middle or upper middle class. The fathers received a higher education and two of them have PhD degrees. All of the fathers, except for one who has a five-year expatriate contract, chose to stay in Sweden for a better work-family life balance. To that end, some of the fathers gave up a higher income and other incentives back in Korea. One of the fathers working now in Ericsson as an engineer recalled the moment he decided to immigrate to Sweden, "I thought I would die, buried by work, if I

didn't do something." Two of the families even had to live separately from their children during weekdays because of work. The grandparents took care of their children instead. They believe good fathering is spending more time with their children, rather than only being an economic provider. Although the fathers try not to identify themselves as merely a breadwinner, it cannot be denied that their role as an economic provider still makes up a large part or even a majority of their fatherhood now regardless of their work environment. Given that about two thirds of their spouses are stay-at-home mothers, learning Swedish or job seeking. Four have full time positions and one is working part time, but it took them years to get those jobs. Compared to when they were in Korea, all of the fathers also feel more obligated to be involved in hands-on childcare; since there is no longer any additional childcare support available, such as always-on-call grandparents and cheap nannies. Their aspirations to be a friend-like dad also increases their efforts with childcare in practice and adds time pressures; the fathers have been juggling their identities as caring and available parents as well as being competent employees at work. However, all of them added that they have high satisfaction in terms of having more time to spend with their family compared to working in Korea.

Fatherhood and the Fathers' Institutional Strategies at Work

A lot of research on fatherhood and policy has focused on fathers' taking a block of leave for childcare. However, during the interviews approximately four types of occasions emerged as moments where fathers felt they needed to stay with their children. It was not only while they had infants, but also every time their children were sick, when their children had an event or activity at school, and when school was on break, regular or otherwise. According to the nature of the occasion and the level of care required, the fathers used different institutional strategies to take time off: paternity leave, parental leave, sick child leave, annual leave, and flexitime (or flex-time).

Since most of the families became single-income families upon immigrating to Sweden, despite the generosity of the benefits, the fathers are not free from economic concerns when it comes time to take leave for a block of time. For instance, out of the nine fathers working in Swedish companies, four had taken parental leave that lasted more than three months and three of the four are still working at the same company where they took the leave. However, the rest of them said they chose not to take parental leave solely due to financial strains. This is also the case among the fathers working in Korean companies. Five of the seven fathers had not taken any parental leave; two fathers took three months of parental leave during the

summer right before they quit from their previous Korean company. The rest of the fathers said that parental leave was not a choice available to them because of financial concerns.

Apart from financial strains, work responsibilities appeared as the second most critical concern, particularly among the fathers working in Korean companies. The differing attitudes were more revealing when they talked about taking paternity leave. Six of the fathers working at Korean companies were eligible for paternity leave, but only half of them used the 10 days of paternity leave available to them; the rest of them took just a couple of days off right after the birth of their child. They explained that they could not be away for “such a long time” because of their work responsibilities at that time. Furthermore, two of the fathers explained their decision by pointing out that ten days was a recommendation not a obligation. In contrast, three of the fathers working at Swedish companies were eligible for paternity leave and all of them took for granted the full length of the leave. Some of those fathers said that they thought that it was policy.

Interestingly, when their children are sick, the fathers regardless of the workplace, rarely use sick child leave; except for one father who works as a designer at a Swedish company. That father said there is no reason not to use this measure since the subsidy comes from the government, not his company’s pocket. However, others explained that they rather use some of their own paid annual leave days to take whole days off and maintain a better income as well. This strategy was particularly dominant among the fathers in Korean companies while the fathers working in Swedish companies took advantage of the flexitime policy to adjust their day work hours instead.

The Gradual Process of Building up a Sense of Entitlement to Fatherhood

During the interviews, regardless of whom they mainly work for, the fathers often said that the boundaries of their role as a father has been expanding into a more hands-on caring practice that they as men had not acquainted themselves with. They said childcare was much easier back in Korea since they had fewer responsibilities, but no one wished that they had gone back to the way things were. One of the fathers who had to live apart from their children for work even said that, “We are a real family now. Everyday I appreciate that we are all living together and we can have dinner together in one place.”

The fathers, no matter where they work, have high aspirations to be good fathers who can spend as much time as possible with their children. However, when it comes to work duties at work, the fathers show differing attitudes. For instance, fathers in Korean companies

repeatedly stated that they are expected to work in a “Korean fashion.” They are all well aware of their eligibility to the various policies as well as the leeway given to them in theory to take time off for childcare when needed. However, they kept saying that exerting their rights to full fatherhood entitlement at work “is not so simple”, while fathers working in Swedish companies said that it is effortless to do so—one of the fathers even described his feelings as, “natural as breathing.” The divergent attitudes towards their legal entitlement did not develop in a day. Daily practices at work permeate into fathers’ perceptions and undergird their reasoning on their entitlement to take time off for childcare, overtaking their aspiration to be an available father.

The Work Cultural Seed for Fathers’ Sense of Entitlement to Take Time off for Childcare

1. Autonomous Arrangements of Work and Non-work Time

First and foremost, the fathers are exposed to differing degrees of leeway with regards to ‘non-working time.’ Non-working time here refers to any instances away from work beyond taking paid leave for childcare, such as paid vacation time, coming to work late, or leaving the workplace early.

While the fathers at Swedish companies feel free to use the entirety of their paid vacation time for the year, no fathers at the Korean companies have done so. Moreover, fathers at Swedish companies take vacation in blocks of time exceeding one month, whereas the maximum number of contiguous vacation days taken by fathers at Korean companies is a mere two weeks. The way an employee takes their leave affects their sense of self-determination in relation to personal time. One of the fathers working at a Korean company added, “How could people dare to say that they want to take time off for a year for childcare when they haven’t even experienced more than one week of vacation time at once.”

This holds true when considering a father’s remark from a Swedish company, “At first, I felt uneasy taking four weeks of leave. It felt really long. But when I came back there were still many seats empty. They hadn’t even gotten back yet! Now I know that my company will never run into trouble while I am away.” The fathers who have taken a long vacation already, feel they can do so again. A father from a Korean company said that he has never tried to apply for a vacation longer than two weeks because he knows it would not be approved. He never even bothers to ask; he added that he does not want to cause any friction by asking for a longer vacation.

The usage of paid vacation time for individual days among fathers in Korean companies was also somewhat different from the fathers working in Swedish companies. The fathers working for Swedish companies adjust their workday hours in order to help their children commute to school. Some of them said that, “No one cares so long as your work evens out to at least eight hours a day. It seems like they trust us. ‘One does his or her part. Even if one does not today, he or she will do so tomorrow or the day after.’” A father who had just started working six months ago said admiringly that, “It was something new for me. No matter when you arrive or leave, all you need to do is just fill up your hours for the day. It feels really good because I feel like I own my work.”

However, the fathers at Korean companies use their paid vacation time when they have to drop off their children at school in the morning or pick them up in the afternoon. A father explained that, “It is easier to just not be seen all day, rather than to say that you have to leave early in the middle of the day while everyone is working.” All of the Korean companies in Sweden allow flexible start and stop times for work. Only one father regularly drives his children to school in the morning and gets to work by nine. The situation for most families is that their spouses take care of the children’s commute and the fathers usually arrive at work around eight.

2. Socially Prioritized Childcare

Secondly, the fathers at Swedish companies are exposed to different messages at work in regards to prioritizing family and childcare when compared to fathers at Korean companies.

The fathers working for Swedish companies constantly see and hear how their male coworkers prioritize their parenting duties over their work. For instance, fathers are able to leave in the middle of a meeting, work from home, bring their children to work, notify their managers of a necessary absence last minute, and leave early to participate in school events and other activities. If the absence is related to their children, it does not need to be justified to managers or colleagues. One of the fathers interviewed stated that, “There is no emotional strain at all. It is so natural to adjust your work schedule for your kids. You can even say, ‘I don’t want a meeting to be held after 3:30 pm since I need to go to pick up my child.’ No one minds.” More importantly, Swedish fathers get constant reinforcement from the workplace that there is no gender-role based disparity in expectations when leaving work early for children. Even the fathers with wives at home full-time feel entitled to leave early when needed.

Similarly to the Korean fathers at Swedish companies, the fathers at Korean companies also observe their Swedish colleagues prioritize their children, especially when working under a Swedish manager. Only one father at one of the Korean companies is working under a Swedish manager. He added that compared to his Korean colleagues he tends to feel less pressure when he goes home early. He said, “Even my manager does that.” However, the fathers working mainly under Korean bosses observe a distinction between the expectations of Swedish fathers and those of themselves, and are resigned to that fact. For instance, fathers at Korean companies rarely talk about going home for a sick child unless the child needs to go the emergency room or their partner is also very sick. Especially Korean fathers who have a wife at home feel uncomfortable being absent from work, since they think, as one father said that, “People know that my wife is a housewife.”

The fathers at Swedish companies have learned that there are essentially no limits when it comes to putting their children first. Interestingly, some Korean fathers at Swedish companies were hesitant at first to leave work when their children were sick, and it was their managers who encouraged them to go home. The managers would ask why they even asked permission for such a thing and emphasized, “Family first.” One of the fathers recalled how anxious he was when he had to go home for a sick child in the middle of the day for the first time; “I had to go home in the middle of a meeting because my child was sick. I felt very sorry at the time to back out while everyone was working. Now? I would go home without even looking back.”

3. Agency-driven, Open Dialogue, and a Flat Managerial Order

The leeway given to fathers to interweave their childcare responsibilities with their work is greatly influenced by their specific organizational structure for work allocation and their employee-manager or employee-company relationships.

The fathers’ experiences are particularly divergent with regards to work allocation. Work allocation includes the amount of work itself as well as the way a manager distributes the workload; these are obviously very closely connected. For instance, none of the fathers at Swedish companies complained about the workload. One of the fathers added that, “It feels like five people share the workload of four people.” They mainly work within their job description. In contrast, the interviewed fathers at the Korean companies usually work longer than any of their counterparts. One of the fathers said, “After six o’clock, only black-hair Koreans are left in the office.” Despite the longer work hour, all of the Korean fathers are

satisfied with their workload compared to what they had back in Korea before coming to Sweden.

The fathers did admit that they have more work due to the fact that impromptu work usually falls to the Korean employees. One of the fathers explained their work pattern, “We are often asked to prioritize orders from the boss. In other cases, we stick to our original job until five and then start with the urgent impromptu work.” The fathers working as managers at Korean companies added that when Swedish employees are constantly given impromptu duties, they usually talk back, asking why they have to do it, ask for a salary increase with a revised job description, or end up quitting their job. A managerial father at a Korean company explained that is why Korean employees end up working more and for longer, “Because Koreans never challenge orders from their higher-ups.”

The biased work allocation towards Korean fathers derives from the traditional underlying relationship norms between employee-manager or employee-company. The fathers working at Swedish companies view their managers as their colleagues rather than their bosses. The fathers said that they can discuss anything with them and they feel that their opinion is as important as any other person in a higher position. However, the fathers in Korean companies see their Korean managers as their bosses whose orders they are compelled to follow. Accordingly, they have a greater fear of their boss’s power. They believe that they can be fired if their bosses so choose, regardless of the labor unions’ protection. Some of the fathers at Korean companies drop by their boss’s office and greet them when they arrive at and leave the office. The work environment surrounding the Korean fathers accordingly becomes less under their control, increasing their sense that they are indispensable to the work. The low level of agency among Korean fathers was even lower when they directly work with Korean managers.

The differing perceptions of managerial power between the fathers at Swedish and Korean companies are partly created by the different promotion systems. While Swedish companies have two tracks for promotion, separating staff and managers, in Korean companies becoming a manager is the promotion track. Apart from performance, one’s age is highly considered when up for promotion; in most cases, older managers lead younger staff. Accordingly, while the fathers in Swedish companies no longer care about promotions except for salary increases, the fathers in Korean companies become more obsessed with the results of managerial evaluations; so as to not to lose out to younger Korean colleagues.

More fundamentally, the fathers' views on the relationship between a company and themselves is also different. The fathers at Swedish companies started viewing themselves as valued and independent employees whose happiness would contribute to the growth of the company. Some of the fathers stated that they trusted that their company would respect their freedom to take time off for childcare. In contrast, the fathers at Korean companies feel subordinate to the company. They feel like it is the company who gives them the opportunity to work and make a living; they feel obliged to work hard to meet organizational expectations. This obligation leads to an increased fear of being replaceable among the fathers, especially those who are fully responsible for being the economic provider. It is a vicious circle since the fear of being replaceable strengthens the habits that increase their sense of indispensability to the work.

Appendix 1.

Code	Age	Occupation	Level of Educational Attainment (degree)	Length of employment with Current Company (years)	Number of Children	Ages of Children (years)
Father S-1	40s	Engineering	College	5	2	11 & 10
Father S-2	40s	Engineering	College	6	1	8
Father S-3	30s	Stock controlling	College	1	1	6 months
Father S-4	40s	Engineering	College	6 months	3	14 & 11 & 11
Father S-5	30s	Engineering	Post-college	6	2	3 & 1
Father S-6	40s	Engineering	College	12	1	9
Father S-7	40s	Research	Post-college	2	2	5 & 3
Father S-8	30s	Strategy Consulting	Post-college	3	2	6 & 4
Father S-9	30s	Design	College	6	2	4 & 2
Father K-1	30s	Accounting	Post-college	4	1	5
Father K-2	30s	Management	College	6	1	1
Father K-3	30s	Management	College	5	1	3
Father K-4	30s	Pricing Analysis	College	7	2	4 & 2
Father K-5	40s	Sales	College	8	2	9
Father K-6	40s	Data Processing	College	8	3	12 & 7 & 4
Father K-7	30s	Marketing	Post-college	3	1	3

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