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Fatherhood in the Nordic welfare states: comparing care policies and practice

Renske Keizer

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BOOK REVIEWS

Fatherhood in the Nordic welfare states: comparing care policies and practice, edited by Guðný Björk Eydal and Tine Rostgaard, Bristol, Policy Press, 2015, 424 pp., £75 (hardcover), ISBN 978-1-44731-047-1

Fathering research is burgeoning, and the role of fathers in family life is an increasingly important focus of both scholars and policy-makers. With gender equality and the integration of mothers into the labour market as high-ranked themes on the policy agenda of governments and supranational organizations alike, father involvement has become the centre of attention. However, great uncertainty exists regarding adequate policy responses, as some studies find effects of policies while others do not. Scholars often point to the Nordic countries as examples for how to encourage both parents to work and care for their children. However, the question to what extent Nordic policies have actually enabled fathers to become involved fathers remains to be answered. This edited volume aims to fill this void by examining the practice of fatherhood in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. The book is divided in five broad themes. The chapters in the first Theme 1 (Fathers, families and family policies) focus on how fatherhood is viewed upon and framed in the Nordic countries – in terms of attitudes, laws and family policies. In my view, especially Chapter 4 (Fathers' entitlements to family benefits) provides a clear picture of how, in contrast to common understandings, there are large differences in policy practices between and within the Nordic countries. In addition, and with clear examples, the chapter illustrates that in Denmark, Finland and Iceland, policies are still based on a gendered division of labour between parents that contradicts the dual earner/dual carer model. In the subsequent two themes, the book focuses on the practices of Nordic fathers in different contexts. In theme 2 (Fathers in everyday life – culture, work and care), interesting insights are in particular derived from the chapters on class (Chapter 6) and workplace environment (Chapter 7). The chapter on differences between working- and middle-class fathers shows how policy, cultural and daily practices of fathers interact. The authors show that the father's quota (non-transferrable parental leave with financial compensation) is viewed and used differently by social class; whereas middle-class fathers use the father's quota to substitute the involvement of the mother, working-class fathers use it to better support the mother of their child. Chapter 7 strikingly shows that a highly gender-egalitarian culture in itself is not enough to encourage fathers to take leave. When a legislative father's quota is absent, as is the case in Denmark, workplace practices remain a barrier to the take-up of parental leave.

In theme 3 (Constructing fatherhood in different family settings), fathering practices in non-traditional families are addressed – Chapters 9–12 focus on highly involved fathers, migrant fathers, gay fathers and divorced fathers, respectively. In line with the findings from theme 2, these chapters show that even in welfare regimes considered

forerunners in the implementation of gender equality policies, gendered expectations regarding the division of paid and unpaid work continue to be at play, at the micro-, meso- and macro-level.

In the fourth theme, linkages between paid parental leave policies and fathering are scrutinized. The findings from all chapters indicate that throughout the Nordic countries, the father quota has proved a very efficient policy measure. Nevertheless, all chapters within this theme point to specific structural barriers for the take-up of father's leave. Without institutional legislation, as the Danish chapter reveals, social class differences in the uptake of leave and gender-equality re-emerge. The Finnish chapter points to the tension that exists between the wish to actively increase gender equality and the wish stemming from the contemporary liberal political climate not to prescribe the behaviour of citizens. The chapter shows how the notion of 'free choice' actually reproduces a gendered division of labour. Finally, the Swedish chapter shows that even though the overwhelming majority of men take leave, they only take a small proportion of what they are entitled to. Again, this chapter reveals that as long as practical and structural constraints remain, fathers will not increase their take-up of leave. In the fifth and final theme of the book (International reflections on findings), the main contributions of the book are reflected upon in light of the existing international literature.

As readers might tell from my description of the numerous themes and chapters, this volume is rich and broad. By touching on so many themes, the editors have provided a terrific overview of fathering practices in the Nordic countries. A drawback, however, is that the individual chapters of the book do not make a perfectly coherent story. As the book is set up, the editors aim to tell two different stories, but these two stories are also somewhat scattered throughout the book. On the one hand, the editors set out to investigate to what extent Nordic policies have actually enabled fathers to care for their families. On the other hand, the book investigates how Nordic fathers practise fatherhood in diverse family settings. Better fine-tuning of these two stories would have improved the storyline of the book. For example, the policy chapters underscore that Nordic fathering practices and Nordic family policy should not be seen as one single experience or policy package deal. Rather, fathers in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden differ in their involvement, based on different political, historical and cultural climates. Given this insight, it is a bit disappointing that in the quantitative empirical chapters where fathering practices are discussed, these insights are often not incorporated, and institutional settings are only taken into account as background information. Another comment pertains to the chapters on international reflections on the book. Although this section is a welcome addition to the volume, it is a bit underdeveloped. The comparisons made with fathering practices in other parts of the world are very insightful, but the reflection on what the findings in this book mean for countries outside the Nordic region is somewhat meagre.

That said, this book encapsulates the state-of-the-art on fatherhood in the Nordic countries. By showing differences in fathering practices within and across the Nordic countries, and by ethnicity, work environment and class, the book emphasizes that fatherhood is a complex and dynamic phenomenon, shaped by and embedded in different familial, organizational and societal contexts. With public spending cuts on the horizon, the

political climate in flux and increasingly family complexity, challenges for enhancing gender equality are waiting ahead. The insights derived from this book are essential for preparing us for the future to come.

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