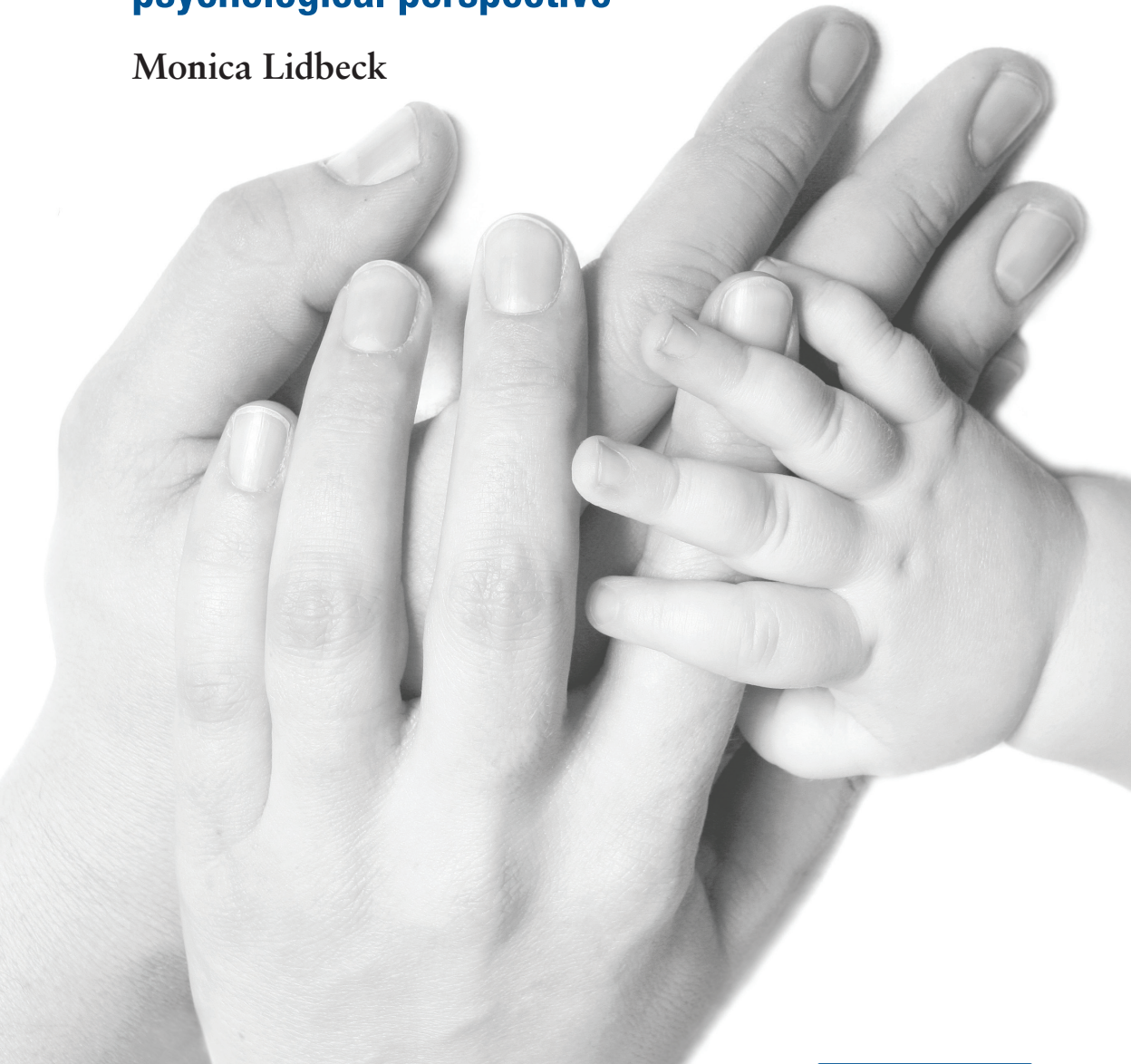


Sharing & Caring

Division of parental leave from a
psychological perspective

Monica Lidbeck



DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY



UNIVERSITY OF
GOTHENBURG

Sharing & Caring

Division of parental leave from a psychological perspective

The parental leave system in Sweden enables both parents to have a caregiving role in family life combined with the role as breadwinner. The scope of this thesis is parents' division of parental leave and how it influences parenting and family life from a psychological perspective.

Four studies examine consequences of division of parental leave by focussing on parents' experiences of equally shared parental leave and how they perceive the shift in caregiving (Study I), and how parents' division of leave influences perceived parenting stress, coparenting quality, work-family balance, and the couple relationship (Studies II-IV).

The findings in the thesis contribute to our understanding of contextual factors for parenting and interactions within the family, from both parents' perspective. Spending time with the child and sharing caregiving responsibilities equally makes a difference for parental roles and relationships within the family, especially for fathers.

The included studies are all based on the research project 'Familjeliv och fördelning av föräldraledighet' [Family life and division of parental leave], initiated by the PhD candidate for this thesis. The project was a collaboration between the Department of Psychology, University of Gothenburg, and the Research and Development Centre for Primary Care in Gothenburg, Region Västra Götaland.



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Monica Lidbeck

Department of Psychology



Doctoral Dissertation in Psychology
Department of Psychology
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*En dag med barnen är roligare än årets roligaste film,
mer komplex än den mest invecklade filosofibok
och innehåller allt som livet har.
Om man upptäcker det vill man inte missa det.*

*Spending a day with your children is more fun
than the funniest movie of the year,
more complex than the most sophisticated philosophy book,
and involves everything that life brings.
If you've been there, you don't want to miss out.*

Johan Norberg
father of four, guitarist, and writer

Abstract

Lidbeck, M. (2020). Sharing & Caring – Division of parental leave from a psychological perspective.

Department of Psychology, University of Gothenburg.

Parents' preconditions for early parenting vary depending on social and cultural contexts. This thesis provides a psychological perspective on parenting and family life within the context of parental leave in Sweden, framed by Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory of human development. In Sweden, both parents have the same right to parental leave, yet little is known about parents' experiences and how parents' division of leave influences their wellbeing and interaction with each other, and their engagement in working life.

The aim of the thesis was to explore how parents' division of parental leave influences parenting and family life from a psychological perspective, by focussing on parents' experiences of equally shared parental leave and how they perceive the shift in caregiving (Study I), and how parents' division of leave influences perceived parenting stress, coparenting quality, work-family balance, and the couple relationship (Studies II-IV).

In Study I, parents' experiences of equally shared parental leave were explored, with a focus on the shift when mothers on parental leave returned to work and fathers took over the primary caregiving responsibility. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 24 parents of 12 infants. The main findings were that paternal involvement in the process of shifting parental leave and the mother's trust in the father's capability facilitated the shift in caregiving responsibilities, and that the parents' shared experiences seemed to increase their understanding of each other's everyday life.

For Studies II-IV, 280 parents recruited from 25 child healthcare centres in Region Västra Götaland answered a questionnaire at six and 18 months after their child was born.

Study II showed that fathers who shared parental leave equally were less likely to perceive parenting stress 18 months after childbirth than those who shared unequally, and that no such association existed among mothers.

Study III showed that both mothers and fathers who shared parental leave equally perceived higher coparenting quality 18 months after childbirth, that mothers who shared parental leave equally were more satisfied with their partner's involvement in caregiving, and that both mothers and fathers who shared parental leave equally reported a better work-family balance.

Study IV showed an association between equal division of parental leave and perceived couple relationship quality 18 months after childbirth in fathers, but not in mothers. The association was not affected by parenting stress or coparenting quality.

The thesis provides new knowledge about the relation between division of parental leave and psychological aspects of parenting and family life. The findings suggest that parents' choices regarding parental leave have consequences from the individual level to the societal level, consistent with Bronfenbrenner's theory. Spending time with the child and sharing caregiving responsibilities makes a difference for parental roles and relationships within the family, especially for fathers. The findings have implications for discussions about parental roles in family support settings, such as parental groups, and for the development of family policy programmes.

Key words: parental leave, coparenting, couple relationship, equality, family life, father involvement, parenting, parenting stress, work-family balance

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Populärvetenskaplig sammanfattning

(Summary in Swedish)

Synen på föräldraskap skiljer sig åt mellan länder och kulturer, liksom förutsättningarna att kunna vara närvarande och delaktiga som föräldrar. I de nordiska länderna finns en tradition av jämställdhetssträvande med höga förväntningar på delaktighet från båda föräldrarna i familjen och från arbetslivet. Föräldraskap formas således av kulturella förväntningar, värderingar och normer, utöver dynamiken i parrelationen och samvaron med barnet. Särskilt betydelsefull är den tid som föräldern tillbringar med barnet, vilket påverkar både hur relationen till barnet och föräldrarollen utvecklas. En annan betydelsefull faktor i familjelivet är hur föräldrarna fördelar ansvaret för skötsel av barn och hushåll mellan sig.

I Sverige ger föräldraförsäkringen föräldrar lika rätt att vara hemma med barnet. När föräldraförsäkringen introducerades 1974 var syftet tvåfaldigt; att båda föräldrarna kan vara närvarande föräldrar och ha en försörjande roll i familjen. Varje förälder tilldelas 240 dagar, varav 90 dagar är individuellt reserverade, resterande dagar kan överlåtas mellan föräldrarna. Numera tar män ut 30 % av föräldradagarna, och ungefär 18 % av föräldrarna delar lika på föräldraledigheten.

Även om föräldrarna sedan drygt 45 år har möjlighet att dela på föräldraledigheten, vet vi ännu inte så mycket om hur det påverkar föräldrarna och samspelet i familjen. Därför är avhandlingens övergripande syfte att från ett psykologiskt perspektiv utforska hur föräldrars fördelning av föräldraledigheten har inflytande på föräldraskap och familjeliv. Genom att fokusera på föräldrars erfarenheter av att dela föräldraledigheten lika och skiftet mellan dem (när föräldrarna lämnar och tar över föräldraledighet), utforskas föräldraroller och psykologiska processer i familjen. Andra psykologiska aspekter som hänger samman med föräldrars fördelning av föräldraledighet berör föräldrars mående och hur föräldrar samspekar med varandra, liksom deras engagemang i arbetslivet. Det utforskas i termer av hur föräldrar påverkas psykologiskt av föräldrastress, hur de upplever stöd av varandra i föräldraskapet och hur de får balans mellan arbete och familjeliv, liksom hur de uppfattar kvalitén i parrelationen.

De samhällsliga faktorernas inflytande på föräldrars förutsättningar att vara närvarande och delaktiga i såväl familjeliv som arbetsliv är centralt för avhandlingens ämne. Därför valdes Bronfenbrenners bioekologiska teori som en teoretisk ram för avhandlingen. Teorin beskriver hur processer som driver individens utveckling samspekar mellan olika system, på olika nivåer över tid.

I **studie I** var syftet att utforska föräldrars erfarenheter av att dela föräldraledigheten lika, med ett särskilt fokus på skiftet mellan dem, när mamma lämnar över ansvaret för barnet och pappa tar föräldraledigt. Tjugofyra föräldrar intervjuades om deras erfarenheter av att skifta föräldraledighet innan deras barn fyllt ett år. Tematisk analys resulterade i tre teman som fanns representerade i alla intervjuer, vilka beskrev att skiftet av föräldraledighet är en process som innebär (1) att ta vara på samma möjligheter, (2) överlämnande av ansvar och kontroll, (3) att få ömsesidig förståelse. Föräldrarna betonade betydelsen av pappans delaktighet och engagemang i processen att skifta föräldraledighet och att ansvar överlämnades från mamma till pappa. Föräldrarna beskrev att deras delade erfarenheter ökade förståelsen för varandra.

I **studie II** var syftet att se om det fanns någon relation mellan föräldrars upplevda föräldrastress och hur de fördelat föräldraledigheten. Deltagarna bestod av 280 föräldrar som besvarade SPSQ, Swedish Parenthood Stress Questionnaire, om upplevd föräldrastress vid 6 månader och 18 månader efter barnets födsel. Resultaten visade att de pappor som delat lika på föräldraledigheten upplevde mindre föräldrastress vid 18 månader efter barnets födsel, jämfört med de pappor som inte delat lika på föräldraledigheten. Hos mammor sågs inte motsvarande förändringar i upplevd föräldrastress.

I **studie III** var syftet att undersöka föräldrars upplevda coparenting, dvs stöd från den andre föräldern i föräldraskapet, och deras upplevda balans mellan familjeliv och arbetsliv i relation till hur de fördelat föräldraledigheten 18 månader efter barnets födsel. De 280 föräldrarna besvarade PAM, Parenting Alliance Measure, frågor om hur nöjda de var med sin partners engagemang i skötseln av barnet och frågor om deras upplevda balans mellan familjeliv och arbetsliv 18 månader efter barnets födsel. Resultaten visade att föräldrar som delat lika på föräldraledigheten upplevde mer stöd i föräldraskapet från sin partner (coparenting) och en bättre balans mellan familjeliv och arbetsliv, än de som inte delat lika på föräldraledigheten.

I **studie IV** var syftet att se om föräldrars upplevda kvalitet av parrelationen förändrades i relation till hur de fördelat föräldraledigheten vid 18 månader efter barnets födsel. Även inflytandet av föräldrarnas upplevda föräldrastress och kvalitet på coparenting på deras parrelationskvalitet undersöktes i relation till fördelning av föräldraledighet. De 280 föräldrarna besvarade QDR36, Quality of Dyadic Relationship instrument samt frågor om föräldrastress; SPSQ, och coparenting; PAM. Resultaten visade att pappor som delat lika på föräldraledigheten upplevde parrelationen som

bättre, än pappor som inte delat lika på föräldraledigheten. Inflytande av föräldrastress och coparenting på parrelationens kvalitet kunde inte bekräftas. För mammor fanns inte motsvarande förändringar i hur parrelationen upplevdes.

Sammantaget visar avhandlingens delstudier på att föräldrars fördelning av föräldraledighet berör psykologiska processer inom familjen, såsom överförande av ansvar och kontroll vid skiftet av föräldraledigheten och att fördelningen av föräldraledighet är kopplat på olika vis till hur de uppfattar sitt eget föräldraskap och samspelet inom familjen. Att dela föräldraledigheten lika främjar föräldrars stöttning av varandra i föräldraskapet (coparenting), och kan bidra till bättre balans mellan arbetsliv och familjeliv. Särskilt för pappor kan erfarenheten av att ha delat lika på föräldraledigheten bidra till en minskad föräldrastress och att parrelationens kvalitet uppfattas som bättre, jämfört med de pappor som inte delat lika. För mammor sågs inte motsvarande kopplingar. Ytterligare studier behövs för att bekräfta resultaten, då få studier har undersökt vad föräldrars fördelning av föräldraledighet har för bäring på deras föräldraskap och familjeliv.

För föräldrar och de som stödjer blivande och nyblivna föräldrar i olika sammanhang, kan en ökad kunskap om psykologiska faktorer inflytande bidra till diskussioner om föräldraledighetens betydelse både för den enskilde föräldern och för samspelet i familjen, liksom i arbetslivet. Avhandlingens delstudier ger också psykologisk kunskap kring hur föräldrars erfarenheter av att ha fördelat föräldraledigheten lika eller på annat vis, sätter avtryck i föräldraskap och familjeliv som kan vara relevanta att beakta i diskussioner kring utformningen av föräldraledighetssystemet.

List of papers

This thesis is based on the following four studies, which will be referred to in the text by their Roman numerals:

- I. Lidbeck, M., & Boström, P.K. (2020). 'I believe it's important for kids to know they have *two* parents': Parents' experiences of equally shared parental leave in Sweden. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, in press, 1 September, 2020.
- II. Lidbeck, M., Bernhardsson, S., & Tjus, T. (2018). Division of parental leave and perceived parenting stress among mothers and fathers. *Journal of reproductive and infant psychology*, 36(4), 406-420. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02646838.2018.1468557>
- III. Lidbeck, M., & Bernhardsson, S. (2019). Having it all – perceived coparenting quality and work-family balance in the context of parental leave. *Community, Work & Family*, Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13668803.2019.1704399>
- IV. Lidbeck, M., & Bernhardsson, S. (2020) What happens to the couple relationship when sharing parental leave? A prospective, longitudinal study. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*, in press, 2 August, 2020.

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Abbreviations

CHS	Child health services
CHS centre	Child health services centre
PAM	Parenting Alliance Measure
QDR36	Quality of Dyadic Relationship instrument
SPSQ	Swedish Parenthood Stress Questionnaire

Introduction

Swedish social policy encourages both parents to share parental responsibilities and enables dual breadwinning. The ideal of equality, strong in all the Nordic countries, is fairly unusual in an international perspective. Almost half a century has passed since the Swedish act regulating parental leave was introduced, giving both parents the same right to parental leave and time with their child early in life (Haas & Hwang, 2012). Today, high commitment and involvement is expected from fathers in contemporary family life (Gislason & Eydal, 2011). Swedish fathers' total use of parental leave has increased to 30% of the 480 benefit days, and about 18% of families choose to share parental leave equally (each parent taking parental leave at least 40% of the parental benefit days, and share 40/60 to 50/50 in ratio) (Försäkringskassan, 2020a; Statistiska Centralbyrån [SCB], 2020).

Still, most mothers take most of the parental leave days and the main responsibility for childcare (Försäkringskassan, 2020b). Previous research on division of parental leave has mainly focussed on sociological or social psychological perspectives on family life and parental leave, working life, and gender equality (Gislason & Eydal, 2011). A psychological perspective on division of parental leave can contribute to the understanding of how structural premises enable shared responsibilities in caregiving, which may have consequences in parenting, parental roles and relationships within the family and in relation to working life. Psychological research on parenting experiences and different division of parental leave is relatively scant. Little is known about how parents experience sharing parental leave equally and how division of parental leave influences psychological aspects concerning parents' wellbeing and parental relationships. Exploration of key psychological aspects, such as parenting stress, coparenting quality, work-family balance, and couple relationship quality, in relation to division of parental leave could contribute to new knowledge about the influence of social policy on parenting and family life.

The overall aim of this thesis was to explore how parents' division of parental leave influences parenting and family life from a psychological perspective. This was carried out in the research project "Familjeliv och fördelning av föräldraledighet" [Family life and division of parental leave], conducted in Region Västra Götaland during 2010-2019. Reporting of the project findings in this thesis is framed by Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theoretical framework, followed by a brief description of the context relevant to the Swedish parental leave system. Next, previous research on parenting

and gender equality in family life is summarised, with a focus on early relationships, paternal involvement, parental responsibilities, coparenting, couple relationships, and parenting stress. The final section of the thesis comprises a description of the empirical studies included in the thesis, including a summary of main findings and a discussion on the implications of the research. The thesis provides new knowledge from a psychological perspective on division of parental leave and increased understanding of modern family life.

Family life from an ecological perspective

The topic of this thesis is linked to the contextual and societal preconditions of the parental leave system in Sweden and the effects of this social policy on family life. A theoretical model that could support multiple perspectives, ranging from societal to interpersonal levels, was therefore used as a framework for the thesis. Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model of human development (1979, 1986, 1994, 2001) addresses multiple factors that might facilitate the understanding of the circumstances surrounding parenthood and parental leave. The theory attempts to explain how individual development is a result of interconnected reciprocal processes from the individual to the societal level over time. The model depicts ecological levels or systems that influence human development directly and indirectly by reciprocal transactions between persons and multiple environments: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem.

The microsystem level is defined as the most proximal setting in which interpersonal face-to-face interaction occurs in interplay with both the immediate and more remote environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). For instance, a child lives in multiple microsystems and engages in interactions with other persons, and these dynamic processes might affect the child's development in various ways. The mesosystem occurs between and across micro settings, and is defined as the relations among microsystems in which the developing person actively participates (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The exosystem includes such settings that the developing person never enters into, yet which can influence the person via relationships and events, such as the parents' work life outside the family (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bronfenbrenner's concept of the macrosystem, finally, differs from the other levels, and was influenced by Vygotsky's and Luria's thinking on how individual development is indirectly influenced by societal factors (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). The macrosystem is an overarching pattern including micro-, meso-, and exosystem characteristics in transaction with a given culture, subculture, or other extended social structure (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1994). This structure includes social, political, legal, and economic systems as well as ideologies, belief systems, values, lifestyles, social classes, or ethnic groups. Consequently, forces from both inside and outside a group of individuals identified as a 'family' will influence how concepts concerning 'family life' and 'parenting' are understood and practiced in all possible ways.

Ecological systems are often presented as layers: distinct concentric circles, each within or surrounding another, like a set of Russian dolls. This

presentation, however, does not demonstrate the complex, interrelationships between the various layers. For example, the mesosystem consists of relations between the microsystems, not an outer layer of the microsystem. The transactions between factors at all levels emerge through interdependent rather than hierarchical processes (Rosa & Tudge, 2013).

The ecological perspective first highlighted the impact of contextual factors on human development and became highly influential (Pleck, 2010). The theory evolved through different phases (Rosa & Tudge, 2013), and eventually the bioecological model was defined as ‘an evolving theoretical system for the scientific study of human development over time’ (Bronfenbrenner, 2001, pp. 6963–6964). The change of the term *ecology* to *bioecology* underlined the active role by the person in his or her development in mutual interaction with other persons and multiple environments. In the final version of his theory, Bronfenbrenner included the Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model of research design. The model combined the theory’s four central elements, which simultaneously influence developmental outcomes (Bronfenbrenner, 2001). In this model, research on human development needs to consider the proximal processes in which individuals with their own personal characteristics interact in settings and influence each other’s development over time, in a historical time and context. The concept of proximal processes is the centrepiece of Bronfenbrenner’s theory, and these patterns of reciprocal interaction are the ‘engines of development’ (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000, p. 118).

The key developmental arena for the individual is the family and other emotionally important relationships (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). One example of the developmental power of proximal processes is the reciprocal effects of one family member’s process of development affecting the other members in the family. Career choices made by one parent may affect the other parent’s ability to have the same engagement in working life. In a similar way, the parent’s personality and the child’s characteristics influence parenting behaviour (Lamb, 2010). Moreover, the parent-infant relationship depends on the transactional quality of third parties, such as the parents’ world of work (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). For example, a parent’s participation in working life influences the amount of time spent with the child, which may have an impact on the parent’s involvement in caretaking and interaction with the child.

Consistent with Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological theory, parental leave can be understood as a process of transactions in terms of their reciprocal influence over time between the societal and the individual levels (Lomazzi et al., 2019; Oláh et al., 2018). For the purpose of this thesis, the theory brings

an understanding of the processes of shared parental leave in both broad and in-depth senses, as social policy factors in the macrosystem are reflected in microsystems such as families' everyday life (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). Equally shared parental leave enables both parents' caregiving and spending time with the child early in life at the microsystem level. The experience as primary caregiver could influence parental roles in various ways. For the infant-parent relation, a longer period with either parent on parental leave may give the child the opportunity to establish a close relationship with that parent. At the mesosystem level of parents' joint caretaking of the infant, coparenting may affect both their own sense of parenting and their relationship as a couple. The exosystem reflects parents' work situations, as well as the quality of the family's social network, which may influence parents' perceived parenting stress. Finally, at the macrosystem level, the thesis takes its premise in the equal opportunities provided by Sweden's welfare systems provide to all parents in terms of parental leave. In particular, the values, gender norms, and socioeconomic status of the family may be important for parents' division of parental leave and for their childcare experiences (Oláh et al., 2018).

Bronfenbrenner's theory describes aspects and complex processes important for the understanding of the developing individual. The bioecological theory has, however, been criticised for being difficult to translate effectively into research, since Bronfenbrenner did not provide a methodological application of the theory or design, nor undertake any research to test the theory. A study design involving proximal processes would be very complex, and few studies have fully applied the theory to empirical research (Tudge et al., 2009). Yet, research on parenting and family processes inevitably needs to consider the societal prerequisites in which families are embedded, even if the influence of different proximal processes cannot be fully accounted for and clarified within the design of single studies. The empirical studies included in this thesis investigate psychological aspects of parenting and family life in the context of Sweden's parental leave system. When interpreting our findings in relation to previous research, contextual factors need to be considered from the bioecological perspective provided by Bronfenbrenner's theory.

To gain an understanding of the family processes that are intertwined in reciprocal interactions within the family, and in transactions over time within the contextual settings, broad perspectives and several psychological concepts are addressed. The following background will therefore take the macrosystem level as a starting point in the description of the parental leave

system that reflects values and social ambitions from a societal perspective. The exosystem level is represented by working life and dual breadwinning. Thereafter, psychological aspects of parenting and family life are explored from the mesosystem to the microsystem level, with consideration of contextual features.

Parental leave as context for family life

The social welfare system and gender equality

The understanding of the influence of social welfare systems takes its starting point in a global perspective at the macrosystem level. Gender equality is the fifth of seventeen sustainable development goals of the United Nations (United Nations [UN], 2015), which advocates social, legal and economic changes at all levels for the promotion of gender equality. One of the signature solutions emphasises the strategic importance of the unequal distribution of care work between women and men (UN, 2017). The design of social family policy systems has resulted in considerable variation in the preconditions for gender equality among European countries (Castro-Garcia & Pazos-Moran, 2016). Sweden has a history of implemented welfare reforms to promote gender equality (Oláh & Bernhardt, 2008), and is internationally ranked very high in terms of gender equality (World Economic Forum, 2020). Contextual factors, such as social policies and workplace arrangements promoting dual breadwinning, appear to be associated with more egalitarian gender role attitudes, and the highest support of gender equality in Europe has been found in Sweden (Lomazzi et al., 2019). There is political consensus in Sweden that emphasises the importance of parental involvement in the well-being of the child, and campaigns have underlined the importance of parents' shared responsibility (Försäkringskassan, 2014a; Klinth, 2008; Johansson, 2011). For this reason, a non-transferable quota of reserved parental leave for each parent was introduced (Duvander & Johansson, 2019). The child's right to a relationship with both parents in accordance with the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, Article 18, is presented as a reason for increasing the equal division of parental leave between parents (Brandth & Gíslason, 2011; UN, 1989). In January 2020 the Convention of the Rights of the Child became Swedish law. Yet, possible consequences of the incorporation of the child's right praxis in the context of social policies are unknown (Leviner, 2018; Lundy et al., 2013).

Family policy programmes were previously mainly targeted at women and the nurturing aspects of fatherhood were not recognised until the mid-1970s (Hobson, 2002; Lamb, 2000). In 1974, for the first time in history, Sweden legalised fathers' right to paid parental leave. The maternity pay to which employed mothers had been entitled was replaced with a gender neutral parental leave system, which encouraged a dual-earner model (Haas

& Hwang, 2012). The leave length was originally six months, but was extended in stages. Only 3% of the fathers took any parental leave in 1974, and then only 0.5% of the total number of days. Nevertheless, making the parental leave system gender neutral, has been described as an example of institutional change, a path breaker, driving the eventual development of gender equality for both women and men (Cedstrand, 2011). The implementation of social policy reforms at the macrosystem level, driven by gender equality values in a social welfare system, initiates changes that transform expectations for parental roles in family life at the mesosystem and microsystem levels. Yet, the outspoken gender equality focus has been criticised to be heteronormative, as most research literature and studies on parental leave allocation refer to parents as ‘mothers’ and ‘fathers’. These terms are also used as essential categories in statistics (Martinsson et al., 2016).

The reciprocal transactions between ecological systems at different levels, also entail consequences for parents’ working life at the exosystem level. The parental leave system was intended to increase gender equality by stimulating paternal involvement in the care and well-being of children as well as enabling both parents’ participation in the labour market (Haas & Hwang, 2012). The subsidised childcare for every child, regardless of parental income, has also contributed to the dual-breadwinner structure (Yerkes & Javornik, 2018). Sweden’s political stance on social and family matters is therefore often used to explain the country’s combined high proportion of women in the work force and high fertility rate (Oláh et al., 2018). By 2018, 84.5% of Swedish children had working mothers, while 93.2% had working fathers (SCB, 2018). However, the length and flexibility of leave afforded by the parental leave system have not solely had positive consequences; negative effects also have been shown on women’s wage development and career possibilities, particularly for mothers who take prolonged (more than 15 months) parental leave (Evertsson & Duvander, 2011).

The political ambition to promote equality and increase paternal involvement is discussed in the public debate in terms of families’ freedom of choice versus governmental initiatives, such as quotas to turn principles into practice (Duvander & Johansson, 2019; Johansson & Klinth, 2008). The extent of the earmarked quota for each parent remains a matter of political debate and gives rise to opposition from the public (Cedstrand, 2011), although attitudes in Sweden towards parental leave seem to be generally positive (Lomazzi et al., 2019). However, since the introduction of the

father's quota in Norway in 1993 and later in Sweden, Iceland, and Finland, the parental leave uptake by fathers has increased (Duvander & Johansson, 2019; Koslowski et al., 2019). The Swedish debate about benefits, disadvantages and effects of quotas was intensified after a government commission in 2017 proposed an increase of quotas from three to five months for each parent, and five months to share between them as preferred (Government Commission, 2017). As of yet, no new laws have been enacted to change the parental leave system.

In theory, parental leave forms preconditions for equality between parents. It is based on the premise that with the same opportunities, women and men would make similar choices (Gislason & Eydal, 2011). In practice, the association between parental leave and equality is more complicated. There seems to be a discrepancy between positive attitudes about fathers' parental leave and the fact that the majority of families choose to divide parental leave in a traditional way, with mothers taking the majority of parental leave days and fathers providing financially for the family (Bekkengen, 2006; Försäkringskassan, 2020b; Lammi-Taskula, 2008; Ma et al., 2019). Equality in parenting cannot be solely defined by parental leave uptake; several other factors come into play, including (but not limited to) women's situation and position in the labour market and the division of household tasks in the family (Almqvist & Duvander, 2014). Factors related to the interface between working life and family life, as well as a psychological perspective on parental roles, parents' interactions, and negotiations of parental responsibilities affecting family life, will be described further on.

The Swedish parental leave insurance system

Sweden's parental leave system is based on two laws; one concerning the right to take leave, the Parental Leave Act (SFS 1995:584), and one concerning the right to receive payment (SFS 2010:110). According to the Parental Leave Act, each parent is entitled to take full-time leave from work until their child is 18 months old, regardless of whether the parents are receiving paid benefits or not.

The parental leave legislation ensures that a parent cannot be discriminated or made redundant by the employer because he or she has become a parent. Thereafter, the parent has the right to leave in connection with receiving parental benefits. The parental leave insurance entitles Swedish

parents to the benefit of 480 days paid by the state when a child is born or adopted. In the description of the parental leave system ‘days’ is used instead of ‘months’, due to the high flexibility of the parental leave allowance (Duvander & Löfgren, 2019).

The parental leave system is gender neutral, which means that both parents are ensured the same possibilities when it comes to staying at home and taking care of the child. Parents with joint custody are eligible to 240 days each; 90 days are reserved for each parent, while remaining days can be transferred to the other parent by signing a consent form. This earmarked quota was introduced in 1995; a second month was introduced in 2002; and a third month, was introduced in 2016. The quota was introduced to encourage fathers to take leave and to care for their child (Duvander & Johansson, 2019). Same-sex parents are entitled the same rights. Parents with sole custody receive all of the 480 parental leave days, while in most cases divorced or separated parents share custody and have the same rights to parental leave (Duvander & Löfgren, 2019).

Fathers or the other parent (or carer), can take temporary leave (‘paternity leave’) for 10 days in connection with childbirth, at the same time as the mother, or at any time during the first 60 days after the child’s birth. These benefit days are intended to provide the father the opportunity to be present at the delivery, to get to know the infant, and to take care of other children in the family. In addition to the 10 days of paternity leave, it is possible for couples to have 30 days of common parental leave, so-called ‘double days’, during the child’s first year. This allows parents to take parental benefit days at the same time, without using their individual quota of reserved benefit days (Duvander & Löfgren, 2019).

The parental leave system also is highly flexible in terms of partial benefit days, which allow parental leave benefits for one full day, three quarters of a day, half a day, a quarter of a day, or even an eighth of a day until the child’s 12th birthday (for children born in or after 2014). After the child’s fourth birthday, only 96 days in total can be used. For children born before 2014, parents may use the benefit days during the child’s first eight years. Claiming fractions of benefit days, and combining paid and unpaid days, can allow parents to stay at home longer (Duvander & Löfgren, 2019).

The economic compensation is fairly high for most parents that are established in working life. All in all, 195 days per parent are paid at 77.6% of earnings, up to an annual income ‘ceiling’ of 455 000 SEK per year. The remaining 90 days are paid at a flat rate of 180 SEK per day. Parents who are not in employment, have very low income or have no income at all, are

entitled to a flat rate of 250 SEK per day for 240 days individually. Parents who have access to only the minimum level payment are more likely to be foreign-born parents, especially mothers, than native-born parents (Duvander & Löfgren, 2019).

Besides the parental benefit days, additional parental leave pay is negotiated in collective bargaining agreements, and companies' top-up payments have become a way of attracting employees (Duvander & Löfgren, 2019).

For a more extensive and detailed description of Sweden's parental leave system, see 'Sweden country note' (Duvander & Löfgren, 2019) and 'Social Insurance in Figures' (Försäkringskassan, 2020b).

Take-up of parental leave

The parental leave system is thoroughly established in Sweden and most parents use the parental leave allowance. Most of the parental benefit days are used during the child's first two years (Försäkringskassan, 2020b). Almost one-third of all children born in Sweden 2018 had parents using 'double days' to be at home together during the child's first year (Försäkringskassan, 2019b).

Although Swedish fathers enjoy better financial support and a legal right to longer paid parental leave than those in other countries, Swedish mothers use 70% of the parental leave available (Försäkringskassan, 2020b; Koslowski et al., 2019). Furthermore, mothers generally take longer parental leave than fathers by prolonging the period of unpaid days (Duvander, 2013; Duvander & Viklund, 2019). Statistics do not include information on unpaid extended parental leave, but previous findings indicate that mothers on average took 5.8 months of unpaid parental leave and fathers only about 1.5 months of unpaid leave (Försäkringskassan, 2014a). This means that couples may share benefits day equally, yet spend different (unequal) time on parental leave (Försäkringskassan, 2018). A recent study on parents of children born in 2009 showed that mothers prolonged their parental leave with about 4 months unpaid leave, and fathers took about 1.5 months of unpaid leave during the first two years (Duvander & Viklund, 2019). The same social factors and gendered patterns in parents' leave taking of parental benefit days, are shown for unpaid parental leave (Duvander & Viklund, 2019).

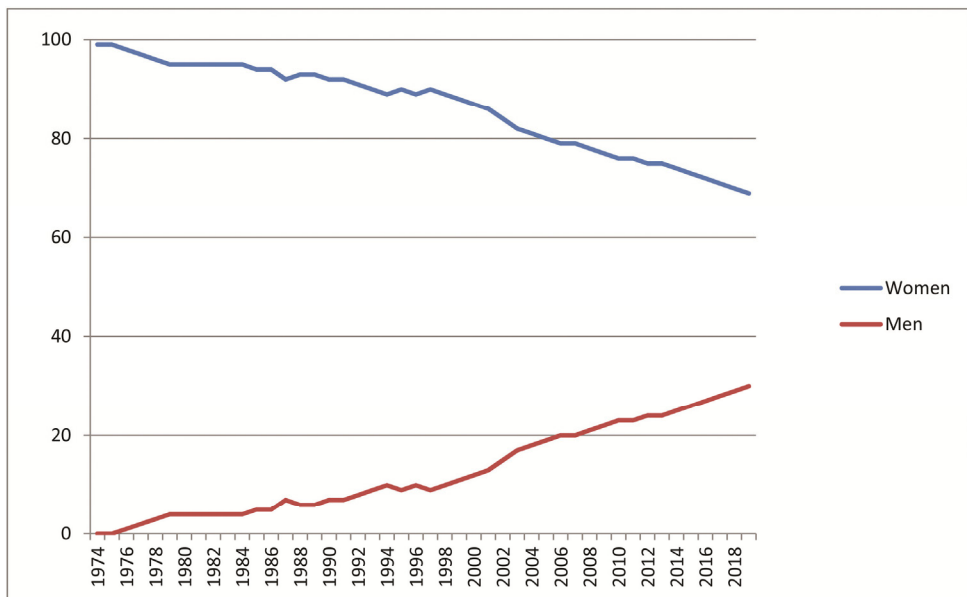


Figure 1. Proportion of women’s and men’s share (%) of parental benefit days 1974-2019. (Försäkringskassan, 2014b, 2020a)

Fathers’ total use of the benefit days has more than doubled between 2002 and 2019, from 12% to 30%, reflecting a growing trend in fathers’ leave-taking, (Figure 1) (Försäkringskassan, 2020a). In addition, most fathers use the parental leave allowance at some stage during the child’s first 12 years (Försäkringskassan, 2019b). Among fathers of children born in 2004, 88.3% used some part of the parental leave in the first eight years of their child’s life, mainly starting when the child was 13 to 15 months of age (Försäkringskassan, 2010). For children born in 2011, there were minimal gender differences in the use of parental benefit days when the children were between three and seven years (Försäkringskassan, 2020a).

Among female same-sex couples, the same patterns as in heterosexual couples have been found in allocation of parental benefit days for their first child (Evertsson & Boye, 2018). The birth-mother had a longer period of parental leave than her same-sex partner. Yet, in comparison with heterosexual mothers, the birth-mothers’ parental leave period was seven weeks shorter than in heterosexual couples (Evertsson & Boye, 2018).

Gender equality can quantitatively be defined as a 40/60 ratio in terms of gender distribution in any particular area (Försäkringskassan, 2018). Equally shared parental leave is therefore defined as between 40/60 and 50/50 division of the paid benefit days. During the child’s first year, a little

over 5% of parents share parental leave equally (Försäkringskassan, 2018). At the time of the child's second birthday, 18.4% of parents of children born in 2017 had shared the parental benefit days equally (40/60 to 50/50 in ratio) which means that fathers were utilising at least about six months of parental leave or an equivalent share of paid benefit days. This might reflect a growing trend, as the number of parents who shared equally almost doubled (9.5% to 18.4%) between the years 2005 and 2017 (SCB, 2020).

Factors related to parents' use of parental leave

One important contribution of research on parental leave has been to explore the connections between parental leave and gender equality. The parental leave system in Sweden enabling parents' the same formal rights to take parental leave, yet parents' actual take-up of parental leave suggests that several factors come into play in the allocation of parental leave between them. In line with Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory (2001), complex reciprocal transactions occur between systems at different levels. Parents' gender role attitudes, values and motives at the macrosystem level might be challenged by financial strain, and work life factors, which involve processes at the macrosystem level, as well as at the exosystem, the mesosystem, and microsystem levels. Consequently, conflict of interest and ideals might affect parents' possible alternatives to make choices concerning parental leave, due to factors at all ecological levels. In the brief following comment on factors crucial for parents' division of parental leave the context will be kept to the Swedish perspective.

When parents themselves communicate the primary motives for their division of parental leave, they describe reasons such as career, household economy, and practical aspects (Almqvist et al., 2011). Previous research has also described parents' motives for lifestyle choices and existential beliefs (Johansson, 2011), and the desire to establish a close relationship with the child seems to be more important than outspoken gender equality as a motive for fathers' decision to take leave (Almqvist et al., 2011; Duvander et al., 2017; Larsson & Björk, 2017). However, fathers are more likely to take parental leave when having their first child (Inspektionen för socialförsäkringen [ISF], 2018). It has been suggested that fathers' commitment to take an extended period of parental leave is influenced by other factors in their working life than the relationship with their child (Almqvist et al., 2011).

Parents' use of paid parental leave is associated with the couple's total income, and parents with the highest income take the least number of parental benefit days during their child's first year, which extends their time on parental leave into subsequent years (Försäkringskassan, 2018). Low-income parents and young parents also tend to use less parental benefit days than the average take-up, as they mainly receive a lower parental benefit, often only the flat rate allowance (Inspektionen för socialförsäkringen [ISF], 2012; Ma et al., 2019). Single parents use most parental benefit days during the first year, which constrains future flexibility to use paid parental leave when needed (e.g. childcare closed days) (Duvander & Viklund, 2019; Försäkringskassan, 2018). Also, separated parents with joint custody who lived together during the first six months after childbirth, have been found to use less paid parental leave during the child's first eight years, than parents who did not separate (ISF, 2017). The findings apply to both parents individually, regardless of point in time of the separation, with the exception of high-income fathers who took more parental benefit days than non-separated fathers. Mothers who separated took marginally less parental benefit days on parental leave, but more parental benefit days during their child's first year, than mothers who did not separate during the eight-year period. In summary, parents' combined number of parental benefit days was smaller for children of separated parents from the year they separated, than for children of parents who lived together, indicating less time spent with a parent for these children (ISF, 2017). Parents' financial situation seems to explain some differences between those who shared parental leave equally during their child's first two years. Among parents with low income, 12% share parental leave equally, compared with 34% of high-income parents (Försäkringskassan, 2018).

Income levels prior to the child's birth, levels of education and occupational status play pivotal roles for parents' possibilities to take parental leave according to their preferences (Duvander & Viklund, 2019; Försäkringskassan, 2018). Fathers with higher education, and men partnered with highly educated women, are more likely to take longer parental leave. For mothers, the reversed relationship applies; lower education is associated with longer parental leave, and if the father has a higher education than the mother, the probability of equal sharing decreases (Duvander & Viklund, 2019; Ma et al., 2019). Couples with higher education are most likely to share parental leave equally (Försäkringskassan, 2016).

Workplace-related factors can encourage or complicate parents' leave-taking decision. Employer's attitudes, organisational culture and perceived

lack of support from employers are factors found to affect fathers' use of parental leave (Bygren & Duvander, 2006; Haas et al., 2002). Fathers' experiences of workplace situation and economic barriers clearly vary. Highly motivated fathers with seemingly stable situations expressed in a Swedish interview study of fathers taking longer parental leave, that they did not request leave; they announced their plans for parental leave (Duvander et al., 2017). To the contrary, Haas and Hwang (2019) identified, in their study of fathers' leave-taking in the private sector, structural work barriers, non-supportive company cultures with negative attitudes towards leave-taking, and experiences of gendered norms of not disrupting work for parental leave. Fathers in executive management jobs are particularly prone to take less parental leave than other fathers, average 35 days compared with 112 days for other higher educated fathers (Försäkringskassan, 2016). In contrast, mothers in management positions tend to share parental leave equally with their partner (Försäkringskassan, 2016). In another Swedish study, Eriksson (2018) found that among parents with a high occupational skill level, fathers with higher skill levels took more parental leave, and mothers took shorter parental leave, than parents with the lowest skill level. Both fathers and mothers with high occupational skill levels appeared to strive for equality by making choices opposing gendered norms for time on parental leave (Eriksson, 2018). Self-employed parents tend to use less parental benefits days than wage-earning parents, with self-employed fathers differing the most in comparison with wage-earning fathers (Anxo & Ericson, 2015). Fathers who share parental leave equally are more likely to be employed in the public sector than in private sector (Försäkringskassan, 2016). In summary, parents' workplace culture and employment status contribute strongly to parents' division of parental leave.

Parents' background is related to their use of parental leave, with parents born outside Sweden being overrepresented in groups who take little or no leave, and to low benefit levels (Ma et al., 2019). Fathers born in Sweden tend to share parental leave more equally than those born abroad (Ma et al., 2019). Another demographic factor is urban versus rural living; the probability of equal leave sharing increases if the parents live in an urban rather than a rural part of Sweden (Försäkringskassan, 2020b; Ma et al., 2019).

Social policy reforms that encouraged a gender-equal division of parental leave, such as the individual quota of reserved months of parental leave, have been found to contribute to an increased equal division of parental allowance within a couple (Ma et al., 2019). The greatest differences

found were in fathers' leave-taking, especially among fathers with low education, lower income, and born abroad, and especially when the first month was introduced 1995. The proportion of fathers using any parental benefit at all increased from 44% to 77%. The reform to allocate a third month to the individual quota had no effect on the number of parents sharing parental leave equally (Duvander & Johansson, 2019; Försäkringskassan, 2019a). The same pattern is seen for fathers' use of 'double days', since the difference of increased leave-taking involved groups with previously no or lower use of parental benefit (ISF, 2018).

Finally, the most important determinant of the extent to which parents take parental leave is the gender of the parent. Gender has a substantially greater influence on the proportion of leave taken by mothers versus fathers than either parent's income or their percentage of total household income (Försäkringskassan, 2013). Previous research indicates that gender norms limit parents' choices regarding engagement in working life and family, as gendered behaviour and expectations are expressed as norms about expected length of parental leave (longer parental leave for mothers and no/shorter leave for fathers). Therefore, parents' gender equality orientation seems to be a crucial aspect in relation to sharing parental leave equally (Almqvist & Duvander 2014; Johansson, 2011; Kaufman et al., 2017). As expected, men with outspoken gender equality orientation tend to more often take long parental leave (Duvander, 2014).

Summarising previous research on parental leave in terms of the bioecological theory (Bronfenbrenner 1979, 1994), the Swedish parental leave programme based on political equality ambitions at the macrosystem level can be considered highly influential at all ecological levels, by setting preconditions for parents to combine family life and dual breadwinning. The body of research investigating factors important for parents' leave taking has evolved from demographical, sociological, economical, and work life perspectives. The understanding of how multiple factors are reflected in complex transactions between and within ecological systems in different contexts has evolved considerably. Yet, knowledge is limited concerning transactions between social policy systems and psychological processes in early family life, involving parenting, parental roles and interactions within the family.

Caring and sharing in modern family life

To understand the experience of parental leave and what kind of processes that occur within the family, a psychological perspective on parenting and family life was chosen, with a focus on fathers' and mothers' parental roles and their interaction after a child is born. From a bioecological perspective, aspects of parenting and family life involve processes primarily within microsystems and at the mesosystem level, but also at the macrosystem level, where norms and values are intertwined in parental roles.

The basis for parenthood is the relationship with the child and the premises for the interaction in the family will be the starting point in this section. The term *family* can be defined as 'two or more persons who are linked together by intimate association, resources, and values and consider themselves to be a family' (Bomar, 2004, p. 9). In family theory and research, the concepts of parenting are mostly termed, explored and discussed in terms of parental roles within heterosexual nuclear families. Obviously, there are different family structures apart from the traditional nuclear family, such as single parent families, stepfamilies, families with same sex parents, and extended families (Golombok, 2015). The Nordic Council of Ministers has highlighted the necessity of parental leave policies to be more inclusive of non-traditional families' needs, since Nordic family benefits systems can have unintended effects on other family constellations than heterosexual nuclear families (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2019). In this thesis *family* is used with the general meaning of Bomar's (2004) definition. Also, *parents* is used when parents' gender has no relevance for the context, recognising similarities concerning parental roles in parenting constructs as suggested by Fagan et al. (2014).

Even if the impact of the early relationships between the child and the parents, siblings, and other close relations has been well established, the past decades have brought a tremendous development of psychological knowledge on how quality in relations and interaction form developmental conditions for the child (Fitzgerald & Bockneck, 2013; Schore, 2001). The integration of attachment theory, neuroscience, and developmental psychology into regulation theory, sheds new light on how the social environment influences life opportunities and developmental trajectories for children and their parents (Schore & Schore, 2008). For instance, a review of the social determinants of health (Marmot et al., 2012), showed that children's early years, as well as societies' social welfare systems, are important factors for the child's developmental, emotional, and social well-being over the life course.

Little is known about whether both parents' involvement in primary caregiving might affect infants' further psychological development. Experimental studies on Swedish infants' face processing and face recognition have shown that caregiver experience (i.e. parents' time on parental leave) influences behaviours related to novelty preferences and visual preferences towards female and male faces (Gredebäck et al., 2012; Juvrud et al., 2019; Rennels et al., 2017). Yet, developmental long-term effects of infants' experiences of distributed caregiving (participating fathers took 28% of parental leave) versus female primary caregiving remain unknown.

Nevertheless, for the individual child, close relationships are the most important influential developmental factor, in accordance with Winnicott's famous statement, "There is no such thing as a baby, there is a baby and someone" (Winnicott, 1964, p. 88). Originally the attachment theory emphasised the mother as primary caregiver, but later research has underscored the importance for the child to form a deep, intimate bond with one or a few caregivers and with no regard to gender (Bowlby 1969; Bretherton, 1992). These attachment relationships are probably developing independently of one another (van Ijzendoorn & De Wolff, 1997). The quality of the parent-child relationship forms the child's confidence in his or her caregiver, i.e. attachment security. When the child explores the environment and seeks security from the caregivers, he or she relates to the attachment figure(s) in a hierarchical order. As parents' involvement in everyday activities seems to affect attachment relationships (Lamb & Lewis, 2010; Lucassen et al., 2011), equally shared parental leave, with both parents actively involved in caregiving, has been argued to be an important contributor to the child's attachment to its parents (Gislason & Eydal, 2011). Parents who shared parental leave equally reported that infants of 18 months turned to both parents when in need of comforting (Evertsson et al., 2018). Furthermore, structural preconditions given by social policy enable parents to be involved in caregiving, and form expectations for parental roles and relationships within the family.

Parental roles and paternal involvement

Parenthood and parental roles are highly influenced by cultural values and norms from the macrosystem level, which influence the expectations for parents to be providers for the family and/or to be involved in caregiving (Schmidt, 2018). Traditionally, mothers have been the primary focus for the

development of theory and research on parenthood. Before the 1960s motherhood was even synonymous with parenthood, and fathers' contribution to parenthood was chiefly that of breadwinners (Cabrera et al., 2000). Research on fathers' points of view was mainly lacking before the 1970s. However, researchers' interest in fathers grew in response to mothers' engagement in working life and increased expectations for father involvement. Parental roles in the care and socialisation of children were discussed, in relation to an increased number of children in childcare and the impact of fathers' absence on their children (Barker et al., 2017; Cabrera et al., 2000). Throughout the 1980s, studies on fathering and caregiving expanded to a cross-disciplinary academic research field (Lamb, 2010). Whether theoretical concepts and research on parenting have contributed to constraining parental roles with the accent on caregiving *or* breadwinning, is explored by fathering scholar Doucet (2020), focussing on the concept of 'father involvement'. Whilst the last decades of research on mothering has made attempts to reflect parental roles *combining* caregiving and breadwinning, the same approach is less explored in fathering studies. Instead, the conceptualisation of father involvement tends to oppose caregiving and breadwinning. Considering these complexities, early parenting needs to be understood in the context of primary and shared caregiving and breadwinning.

Moreover, parental roles are formed by expectations of involvement in caregiving which differ between genders, besides the influence from cultural background, socioeconomic class, and values from community contexts (Lamb, 2010). Although studies on fathers' parental roles and paternal involvement highlight the importance of considering the contextual influence at all levels, the understanding of fathers taking leave alone is still premature (Fagan et al., 2014; O'Brien & Wall, 2017). In the following sections, the main focus on parental roles is on fathers' caregiving, the interaction between parents and shared responsibilities in early family life.

In a literature review, Plantin, Olukoya, and Ny (2011) found that fathers' involvement in childcare may have a positive effect, not only for the fathers themselves, but also for their families, including the development and well-being of the child. Fathers' supportiveness has been shown to affect children's socio-emotional and cognitive achievements in particular (Barker et al., 2017; Cabrera et al., 2007; Lamb, 2010; Sarkadi et al., 2008). Subsequently, as one way to promote a good start in life for all children, the World Health Organization (WHO) recommends that governments prioritise and support men's roles as parents (Marmot et al., 2012).

Fathers too have voiced a desire to be caring fathers (Genesoni & Tallandini, 2009; Johansson, 2011; Kaufman & Grönlund, 2019; Kushner et al., 2017). Several studies have suggested that the biological basis for fatherhood is triggered prior to and around the birth of their infants and fathers' bond with their children through involvement and caregiving (Abraham & Feldman, 2018; Lewis & Lamb, 2003; Rilling & Marscaro 2017). Yet, the transition into early parenthood might trigger emotions of helplessness, due to lack of prior experience, until confidence in caregiving tasks is gained (Kowlessar et al., 2015). Descriptions by fathers of infants reflect positive experiences such as a strong connection to the family, but also tiredness and frustration in attempts to keep the balance between caring for an infant and working life (Chin et al., 2011; Genesoni & Tallandini, 2009; Kushner et al., 2017).

Fathers' parenting behaviour has more similarities with than differences from mothers', but fathers usually spend less time with their infant than mothers do (Lamb & Lewis, 2010). Not surprisingly, most working fathers get less experience of caretaking than mothers on parental leave, which in the long run may have consequences for their sense of competence as parents (Chin et al., 2010; Genesoni & Tallandini, 2009; Kushner et al., 2017). Yet, both mothers and fathers seem to learn and develop parenting skills gradually. When fathers are spending time and interact with their child they are developing confidence and parenting skills, which makes adaptation to parenthood run more smoothly (Duvander et al., 2017; Lamb & Lewis, 2010; Rehel, 2014). Hence, the opportunity for fathers to take parental leave was initiated from a societal level in Sweden to promote both parents' sense of confidence and trust in their parenting skills (Gislason & Eydal, 2011).

Paternal involvement in terms of time spent with children is high in all Nordic countries when compared internationally (Haas & Hwang, 2012; Hook & Wolfe, 2012; Smith & Williams, 2007). The quality of the father-child interaction seems to be related to both the amount of time of engaged activity that the father spends with the child and the father's parenting style (Brown et al., 2007). Father-child interaction and the amount of time fathers spend with children over the week seems to have increased since previous generations, possibly reflecting a growing trend for paternal involvement despite individual and cultural differences in fathers' level of engagement (Cabrera et al., 2000; Craig et al., 2014; Pleck, 2010). However, paternal involvement in terms of the amount of time (quantity) cannot solely be considered, as the quality of their involvement also needs to be addressed (Fagan et al., 2014).

Several studies have confirmed the parental influence via parents' behaviour in interaction with their infants through play, communication, and sensitive response (Lamb, 2012). Fathers' interaction styles have been discussed in relation to cultural variations and expectations for caregiving and playful activities (Buckley & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2010; Lewis & Lamb, 2003; Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2013). In a Swedish context, first-time fathers emphasised the importance of being involved throughout pregnancy, during delivery, as well as in the care of the infant (Fåggerskiöld, 2008; Premberg et al., 2008). Another Swedish study found that fathers are more involved in caregiving than in playful activities with their toddlers (Hallberg et al., 2007).

An emerging body of research studies whether fathers' parental leave is associated with different types of father involvement. In a comparative analysis of data from 27 European countries, fathers' parental leave was associated with increased involvement in childcare; the longer the leave, the more time fathers devoted daily to their children (Meil, 2013). In a Swedish context, fathers who take longer periods of parental leave tend to work fewer hours when their children are older, engage more in childcare tasks, are more likely to have sole responsibility at times, and report higher satisfaction with their contact with the child (Almqvist & Duvander, 2014; Duvander & Jans, 2009; Haas & Hwang, 2008; Haas & Hwang, 2012). Moreover, a Norwegian study confirmed the long-term effects of four weeks' parental leave during the child's first year on fathers' increased involvement in childcare (Rege & Solli, 2010). Also, parental leave of five weeks was related to paternal involvement in terms of greater mind-mindedness in Danish fathers' interaction with their pre-school child (Tharner et al., 2016). An increased sense of parenting confidence and improved parenting skills was reported in a qualitative study that explored Portuguese fathers' experiences of one month of parental leave alone (Wall, 2014). Short-term leave of about two weeks do not, however, appear to have the same long-term impact on fathers' involvement according an American study (Seward et al., 2006). Nor did an Australian longitudinal study on time-diary data show an association between fathers' duration of leave and time spent with their infant at age 4-19 months (Hosking et al., 2010). In a recent longitudinal study, Petts and Knoester (2018) showed an association between American fathers' length of parental leave (from 0 to 5 weeks or more) and engagement in developmental tasks and caregiving during the early years.

A Norwegian interview study found that fathers who combined flexible part-time leave with part-time work tended to be less engaged in their parental role and in childcare, due to prioritising work and experiencing

double stress (Brandt & Kvande, 2016). Yet, little is known about how fathers' leave taking in relation to societal and personal preconditions affect fathers' further involvement. Few studies have yet been published suggesting zero effects of parental leave taking on fathers' involvement and the influential, but long-term, factors have not been fully explored.

In the theoretical development of the *paternal involvement* concept, Pleck (2010) suggested a revised conceptualisation of paternal involvement that includes *positive engagement activities, warmth, responsiveness, and control* in terms of monitoring and decision-making, as primary components. Pleck also suggested that the paternal involvement definition should include two auxiliary domains: *indirect care* and *process responsibility* (Pleck, 2010). The latter domains reflect how fathers provide life opportunities *for* the child (social and material indirect care), and form preconditions to meet the child's emotional, practical and social needs through a process of responsibility which does not necessarily involve direct interaction with the child (Pleck, 2010). In the discussion concerning the evolution of the paternal involvement concept, breadwinning has been considered a form of material indirect care, intra-connected with caregiving (Doucet, 2020).

Yet, fathers' positive activity engagement can be characterised in multiple ways, and the theoretical concepts concerning parental responsibilities and involvement in the care of the child are discussed and not fully developed (Doucet, 2015; Fagan et al., 2014; Pleck, 2010; Schoppe-Sullivan & Fagan, 2020). As Fagan et al. (2014) underline, the constructs do not describe parenting behaviours exclusively for fathers; mothers engage in similar behaviours. The evolution of the paternal involvement concept emphasises the domain of *process responsibility*, defined as the role fathers take in arranging and providing resources for the child's needs as distinct from direct care of and interaction with the child (Pleck, 2010). Doucet (2015) defines parental responsibility as comprising of a set of: (a) emotional, (b) community, and (c) "moral" responsibilities. The emotional responsibility reflects parents' caregiving and knowledge of the child's needs, but also the ways parents assess the response from the child. The community responsibility is equivalent to Pleck's concept of social indirect care (Pleck, 2010), and the "moral" responsibility encompasses social values and gendered norms of breadwinning and caregiving for mothers and fathers (Doucet, 2015). In the continuum of process responsibility presented by Doucet (2006), fathers were classified as managers, partners, or assistants, depending on their paternal role and involvement.

Cabrera et al. (2014), proposed an expanded model of the ecology of father-child relationships, which emphasises the environmental and psychological context of parenting, including the understanding of paternal involvement. The heuristic model is a framework for a broad range of research questions that exemplifies the complexity in conceptualisations of fathering, and highlights the importance of researchers' contextualisation when studying family relationships and children's development. The expanded model builds on Bronfenbrenner's theory and emphasises the reciprocal dynamic systems in which the relationship between fathers and children evolve over time. The model also accounts for how feedback loops influence the interactions within the family system and how external factors might trigger changes in the relations to all family members (e.g., workplace conditions, social policies). Kulik & Sadeh's (2015) study of Israeli fathers' involvement in the care of young children applied such a broad bioecological perspective in their exploration of contributing factors at multiple ecological systems levels. For example, urban-living fathers who perceived the mother's behaviour as high maternal gatekeeping, tended to be more involved in caregiving than fathers in rural settings.

Promoting gender-equal parental roles and shared responsibility in caregiving has influenced the norms of masculinity towards a more caring masculinities (Elliott, 2016) and child-oriented masculinity (Almqvist et al., 2011; Bekkengen, 2006; Johansson & Klinth, 2008). This evolution of parental roles could be understood from a psychological perspective, as it is through involvement in caregiving that emotional relationships are established. For the understanding of the dynamics of parental roles in early family life, parents' interaction and shared responsibilities must be considered.

Coparenting and work-family balance

In family life, parents' attitudes and engagement in caregiving are partly reflected in how parents relate to each other as parents, distinguished from couples' interaction within their relationship. The way parents share responsibility, collaborate and agree on childrearing issues, and the extent to which parents trust and support each other is referred to as *coparenting* (Feinberg 2003). The concept of coparenting is based on family systems theory, which concerns dynamics in family interactions (Minuchin, 1985), and object relation theory (Weissman & Cohen, 1985), which describes

aspects of parents' supportive and undermining behaviour in relation to each other's parenting efforts. Parents differ in their encouragement and how they manage to coordinate or undermine each other's parental activities. The extent to which parents believe they cooperate in a working relationship is termed *parenting alliance* (Weissman & Cohen, 1985). The concept of coparenting can be considered a broad multidimensional construct with different underlying conceptualisations of the term, and operational definitions in studies of coparenting vary (Teubert & Pinquart, 2010). Also, structural preconditions and cultural values on parental roles become overt in findings on coparenting from different contexts.

In line with the Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory, parents' interaction with each other at the mesosystem level is of importance for the child's socioemotional development (Teubert & Pinquart, 2010). A sound parenting alliance enables parents to communicate child-related information, respect the other parent's involvement, and cooperate to meet the needs of the child (Konold & Abidin, 2001). Each parents' relationship with the child is developed within the coparenting relationship, and parental roles are therefore shaped in the context of the alliance and the extent to which parents cooperate (Cabrera et al., 2014). As an example of transactions between the ecological levels, mothers who reported difficulties in communication with their partner at the mesosystem level tended to enjoy parenting their infant less at the microsystem level, than those in couples with a more positive communication style (Matthey et al., 2012).

Parents' interactions within the coparenting relationship are also influenced by their values and gender role attitudes at the macrosystem level (Buckley & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2010). Whether parental roles are or should be equal, is not implied by the term coparenting (Feinberg, 2003). Parents' satisfaction with the degree of equality in the coparenting relationship is determined within their agreement on the distribution of parenting responsibilities. Still, the expectations of their partner's parenting competence are likely to reflect social values in relation to their own parental role. Mothers who have a positive attitude to the father's competence were less likely to show negative *maternal gatekeeping behaviour* (e.g. control or discourage) and more likely to promote shared responsibility for caregiving (Puhlman & Pasley, 2013). Mothers' positive attitudes towards fathers' initiatives are described as *gate opening behaviour* (Olsavsky et al., 2019). Thus, fathers' caregiving involvement is related to mothers' degree of support or criticism (Murphy et al., 2017), and the relationship with the partner seems to influence fathers' self-efficacy in parenting tasks (Sheedy &

Gambrel, 2019). Different kinds of father involvement seem to influence coparenting in different ways; father involvement in play increased supportive coparenting, whereas caregiving has been associated with less supporting coparenting behaviour (Jia et al., 2011). If fathers' sense of competence and child engagement is high, more conflicts and interferences are observed in triadic interactions (Favez et al., 2016). Also, coparenting quality decreases in terms of less supportive interaction, when parents disagree about the maternal role (Favez et al., 2016). Dyadic adjustment in terms of coparenting closeness, indicating how much parents grow together when sharing the parenting experience, has been associated with fathers' perceived maternal gatekeeping (Olsavsky et al., 2019). In all, the way parents are able to serve as a coparenting team reflects the quality of the coparenting relationship, which has been shown to remain stable during infancy (Favez et al., 2016; Feinberg, 2003).

The concept of *work-family balance* refers to how work and families intersect and influence each other, both as facilitators and as a source of conflicts when balancing professional duties and family responsibilities (Lomazzi et al., 2019). Different social structures, ideologies, cultural values and gendered expectations for parents' engagement in working life form conditions that influence whether parents' integration of family life and paid work is possible to achieve, and whether having dual breadwinners is experienced as challenging (Doucet, 2006). Lomazzi et al. (2019) confirmed that both institutional and workplace arrangements supporting dual breadwinning – caregiving are associated with more egalitarian gender roles, enabling combinations of care and paid work for both men and women. Swedish couples' attitudes towards gender equality also seem to influence how they made adjustments to their work situations after becoming parents, and when both partners held more positive attitudes towards gender equality, the father was more likely to change his work situation (Kaufman & Bernhardt, 2015).

Clearly, in the interaction between parents and their engagement in family life and working life reciprocal transactions between all ecological system levels come into play. Kaufman and Almqvist (2017) argue that the earmarked quota for each parent in the Swedish parental leave system contributes to better balance between family life and working life, by promoting gender-equal parenting. Also, studies on parents' experiences of shared parental leave have found that the parents' similar experiences and shared responsibilities seem to increase their confidence and trust in each other's capability as parents (Almqvist et al., 2011; Almqvist & Duvander,

2014; Duvander et al., 2017). Hence, to understand the way parents' coparenting relationship and work-family balance evolve, attitudes and practices reflecting parental gender equality need to be considered.

Parental gender equality and couple relationship dynamics

Parental gender equality in family life is a multidimensional concept that relates both to attitudes towards gendered specialisation of roles and tasks, and actual involvement in caregiving and responsibility for household work (Lomazzi et al., 2019). In the Nordic context, expectations of shared responsibility for caregiving are high, due to women's high participation in working life (Gislason & Eydal, 2011; Oláh et al., 2018). At least some part of parental leave is nowadays considered the norm for fathers in Sweden (Brandén et al., 2016; Gislason & Eydal, 2011; Johansson & Klinth, 2008). Despite this ideal, mothers still use parental leave allowance much more than fathers during their child's first year (Duvander & Löfgren, 2019). The gendered parental leave outtake, has been discussed in terms of different expectations for parental roles (e.g. Almqvist & Duvander, 2014; Brandén et al., 2016; Oláh et al., 2018). Fathers' parental responsibilities seem to hold a higher degree of freedom than mothers', and fathers have the right to choose how much involved they want to be, e.g. length of parental leave. In contrast, mothers' parental responsibility is considered to be less voluntary, as women often are regarded as, and serve as, primary caregivers (Bekkengen, 2002; Elvin-Nowak & Thomsson, 2001; Kaufman & Almqvist, 2017). These differences in parental roles can be considered as social constructions, in which parents are "doing gender" as an activity shaped by ongoing negotiations of various tasks and expectations (West & Zimmerman, 1987).

The division of household work often becomes more traditionally divided when couples become parents. Couples have been found to have a more equal division of time spent in housework when they share childcare tasks equally (Evertsson, 2014). Other studies performed in Sweden found that fathers have increased their involvement in childcare, but not their involvement regarding shared responsibility for household work (Almqvist et al., 2011; Försäkringskassan, 2014a; Oláh et al., 2014). Bekkengen (2006), had noticed these differences in fathers' responsibilities, and suggests to distinguish between child-oriented masculinity and gender-equal men. The attempt to make sharp distinctions between positions in fathers' masculinity has been questioned by Klinth & Johansson (2010), who argued that

involved fathers may express both masculine identities. Nevertheless, fathers' engagement in household work and childcare has increased, but mothers still spend more time doing unpaid domestic work and childcare (Brandén et al., 2016; Hagqvist et al., 2017; Johansson, 2011; Oláh et al., 2018).

Previous research also found that attitudes and practices concerning responsibility for household work differed among gender equal-oriented fathers with experiences of an extended period of parental leave (Klinth & Johansson, 2010). A qualitative study of Swedish fathers who shared parental leave equally, found that staying at home included the main responsibility for household work, and their working partners were involved in household work in the same way as fathers had been before they took parental leave (Duvander et al., 2017). A British study (Pinho & Gaunt, 2019) showed that fathers who assumed the primary caregiving role and their breadwinning spouses, distributed caregiving and household work according to their family roles, despite gender norms. This approach was interpreted to 'undo gender' in parenting. Furthermore, emotional caregiving was shared more equally among those couples than among traditional couples with the mother as primary caregiver. Yet, there are methodological challenges to capture parents' parental responsibilities. Eriksson (2019) found that couples' care trajectories in terms of time allocations by mothers and fathers during the child's early years, could be captured for couples who take month-or yearlong turns as primary caregivers, while dual-caring couples who share care equally on a daily or weekly basis were not possible to detect. This finding indicates that temporality in couples' actual responsibilities in caregiving and household work during short episodes of paid and unpaid parental leave, might not be acknowledged in studies based on register data.

Parental responsibilities and everyday practices are often developed gradually and do not always undergo negotiation (Elvin-Nowak & Thomsson, 2001). Parents' engagement in early family life also might be considered differently over time. One of five parents seemed to regret their division of parental leave in retrospect; fathers wishing they had taken longer leave, and mothers wishing they had taken a shorter period of leave (Brandén et al., 2016). The fact that mothers take parental leave earlier and for longer periods than fathers was found in a review of previous research to contribute to the division of responsibilities in the family (Oláh et al., 2018). Equally shared parental leave may presume that both parents are being emotionally and practically responsible, but expectations that the mother would carry responsibility even when the father was on parental leave can be pronounced

by her experience of early caretaking (Almqvist & Duvander, 2014; Doucet, 2004; Doucet, 2015; Rehel, 2014).

Concerning mothers' parental responsibilities, a study of employed mothers in Sweden (Elvin-Nowak, 1999), described mothers' sense of consciousness about the child's needs as an ongoing process which could occupy the mind, often paired with feelings of guilt if she believes she has failed to shoulder her responsibilities at all times. Almqvist and Duvander (2014), describe mothers' mental organizing responsibility in the family (e.g. fixing children's clothes and staying in contact with preschool), even when the fathers took long parental leave. These findings on mothers' parental responsibilities correspond to Doucet's (2015) concept of 'emotional responsibilities' in parenting, which are developed through interactions with the child and can enrich both parents' sense of attentiveness and responsiveness to the child's needs. When fathers stay at home and get involved in parenting early, a deeper understanding of the care work beyond the caregiving tasks might evolve through shared responsibilities in caregiving (Doucet, 2015; Rehel, 2014).

Parents negotiate parental roles within a coparenting relationship that is distinct from, albeit related to, their couple relationship. Parents' awareness of each other's needs and their relationship seems to predict marital satisfaction. It seems that parenthood can both strengthen (Kluwer, 2010) and strain the couple relationship (Bäckström et al., 2018; Mitnick et al., 2009; Nelson et al., 2014; Shapiro et al., 2000). Role conflicts and restriction of freedom after the birth of a child might contribute to a lower relationship quality (Oláh et al., 2018; Twenge et al., 2003). The demanding task of combining childcare, household work and paid work might also trigger couple relationship parental friction (Kushner et al., 2017; Yarwood, & Locke, 2016). Also, conflicting views on division of paid and unpaid, domestic, work have been shown to increase the risk for marital separation (Oláh & Gähler, 2014).

Moreover, shared responsibility for breadwinning and household work may be associated with higher rates of conflict than in 'less equal' couples (Lomazzi et al., 2019; Magnusson, 2006). The WHO report (Marmot et al., 2012) commented on risk factors for psychosocial stress that affect women attempting to balance expectations regarding caregiving, paid work, and housekeeping, while men's health was more often affected by work conditions. Yet, Norwegian fathers who combined parental leave and flexible part time work reported strain and stress, similar to the maternal psychosocial risk factors mentioned above (Brandth & Kvande, 2016).

Nyström & Öhrling (2004) concluded in their literature review, that mothers' experiences of parenthood during the child's first year was overwhelming, with their stress being related to the primary caretaking responsibility. Fathers' experiences of strain have been linked to demands in the transition to the parental role (Kowlessar et al., 2015; Nyström & Öhrling, 2004). Consequently, couples' negotiations of parenting practices and parental gender equality within early family life reflect reciprocal transactions between ecological systems at all levels.

To sum up, a wealth of research has established the importance of family relationships and interactions for the development of children, but there is limited knowledge on how parents of infants collaborate in their caregiving responsibilities and how parents' couple relationship may be affected by division of parental leave. Therefore, psychological aspects of parenting and early family life need to be further explored from both parents' perspective when they put ideals into practice by sharing the parental leave equally. A better understanding also is needed of how parents' experiences from different division of parental leave could be reflected in psychological aspects of early family life in terms of coparenting, work-family balance, and the couple relationship.

Parenting stress in families

Parents experience parenthood in different ways, and the concept of parenting stress could serve as an example of the complexity that Bronfenbrenner's (2001) bioecological model describes. Parental roles are affected of several interacting factors within and between systems at different levels, and these reciprocal transactions over time are reflected in experiences of parenting. Whether the parental role brings mostly positive experiences or recurring struggles will affect and consolidate interactions within the family's microsystems and at the mesosystem level, already from the transition to parenthood (Olsavsky 2019; Premberg et al., 2008). In Abidin's (1992) theory of parenting behaviour, parenting stress is described as a central component that influences parenting behaviour, and which, in itself, is influenced by parent characteristics, child characteristics, and situational/life demographics, through the moderating variable parental role.

Parenting stress is described in the literature as the result of a perceived discrepancy between the specific demands associated with parenthood and the parent's personal resources (Abidin, 1992; Östberg, 1999). Deater-Deckard (1998) suggested that parenting stress is a natural consequence of parenthood, emphasizing individual differences in parenting stress and the variation in the ranges from normal parenting stress as well as more extreme, clinically relevant variants of parenting stress.

In the transition to parenthood, prenatal negative feelings about the pregnancy, the upcoming birth, and the first weeks with a new born baby, have been found to be associated with parenting stress in both mothers and fathers (Hildingsson & Thomas, 2014). Pregnancy-related anxiety and depression during early pregnancy have been found to be risk factors for parenting stress among fathers (Saisto et al., 2008; Skjothaug et al., 2018).

The experience of parenting also seems to affect levels of parenting stress as the family develops. First- and second-time mothers and fathers differ in their sources of stress, which are related to their confidence in caregiving and the challenges of meeting the needs of one versus two children (Knoester & Eggebeen, 2006; Krieg, 2007). Demanding circumstances, such as preterm birth, trigger parenting stress in both parents, and parents' involvement in the care of the infant contributes to reducing stress levels (Mörelis et al., 2015). Parenting stress in fathers of preterm infants has been found to increase between six and 12 months, while decreasing in mothers during the first year (Schmöker et al., 2020).

Fathers' competence in the routine caretaking of the toddler, as well as child-related variables such as fathers' assessment of their child's temperament (Saisto et al., 2008), have been associated with higher parenting stress in fathers than in mothers. Yet, previous research also has pointed to mothers' perceptions of the child's temperament as 'fussy-difficult', hassles from child caretaking, and poor sleeping patterns in the child as strongly associated with maternal parenting stress (Sepa et al., 2004; Sorondo & Reeb-Sutherland, 2015; Östberg & Hagekull, 2000). Parenting stress in terms of daily hassles and major life stress has been found to have consequences for the dyadic interaction in early parent-child relationships (Crnic et al., 2005). In a recent longitudinal study, associations were found between parental bonding, parenting stress, and child executive functioning, in both mothers and fathers (de Cock et al., 2017). Poorer prenatal bonding predicted poorer postnatal bonding and the parents were more vulnerable to parenting stress, which in turn was associated with more child executive functioning problems. Higher levels of parenting stress also have been linked to more withdrawal problem behaviour, severe attention problems, and aggressive behaviour problems in insecurely attached children, but not in securely attached children (Tharner et al., 2012). Other consequences of elevated parenting stress might affect an abiding biological vulnerability to stress in the child (Koch et al., 2010), and an increased risk of child behaviour problems (Neece et al., 2012). Another recent longitudinal study based on assessment of 835 parent-child dyads at ages 1, 2, and 3 (Cherry et al., 2019), found that parenting stress and children's behaviour problems were relatively stable over time and had bidirectional associations from infancy to toddlerhood.

Even if parenting stress has a complex and multifactorial origin, the construct of parenting stress has been confirmed as well as its association with parents' general health, depression, anxiety, psychological problems and experiences of serious life events in mothers and fathers (Koch et al., 2010; Pripp et al., 2010; Saisto et al., 2008; Skreden et al., 2012; Tedgård et al., 2019; Östberg & Hagekull, 2000).

Parenting stress in terms of role restriction, i.e. feeling trapped by parental expectations and responsibilities, seems to affect mothers more than fathers (Hildingsson & Thomas, 2014; Widarsson et al., 2013). Previously identified maternal risk factors for parenting stress are post-partum depression (Andersson & Hildingsson, 2015; Saisto et al., 2008), parental dissatisfaction (Sepa et al., 2004), perceived high workload, and lack of social support (Östberg & Hagekull, 2000). Hildingsson and Thomas (2014) found that mothers with higher education reported higher levels of stress, while

previous research has shown inconsistent results about the association between level of education and parenting stress in mothers (Andersson & Hildingsson, 2015; Lagerberg et al., 2011; Saisto et al., 2008; Widarsson et al., 2014; Östberg et al., 2007).

Fathers have reported more social isolation than mothers (Hildingsson & Thomas, 2014; Skreden et al., 2012; Widarsson et al., 2013). Risk factors for parenting stress among fathers include low sense of coherence (which involves comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness), and low dyadic consensus (Widarsson et al., 2014). Furthermore, changes in the couple relationship have been associated with more parenting stress in fathers than in mothers (Deater-Deckard & Scarr, 1996).

In the couple relationship, elevated levels of parenting stress have been found to affect couple relationship quality (Durtshi et al., 2017; Nelson et al., 2014), and contributed to higher risk of couple dissolution (Kerstis et al., 2014; Widarsson et al., 2019).

Parenting stress in mothers has been moderately stable over a 6-year period (Crnic et al., 2005; Östberg et al., 2007), and the effects of stress on parents in early childhood have been suggested to accumulate from pregnancy across the preschool period (Crnic et al., 2005). Clearly, parenting stress may affect families' wellbeing and interactions in multiple ways and over time. Studies on parenting stress tend to focus on problematic consequences and examine different risk factors for children and parents. Less is known about how family policy systems and parent's personal resources, such as experienced confidence in parenting skills and parental involvement, might serve as protective factors. A Korean study of 255 healthy infants found that paternal involvement, in terms of caregiving and providing emotional support to mothers, reduced maternal parenting stress (Kim et al., 2016). This in turn was associated with positive infant neurological development, with an even stronger direct effect of paternal involvement on infant neurodevelopment. Even if fathers' involvement has been found to positively influence processes that benefit the wellbeing of family members in one context such as that of Korea, the findings cannot be generalised into other settings or countries. It is not known whether the Swedish parental leave programme promoting father involvement in family life may have a similar positive influence on parenting stress.

In summary, research on parenting stress in both parents have described influences from multiple factors and consequences for families with young children. Previous research on parenting stress underlines the importance of societal factors, yet studies on family life and the influence of parental leave on parenting stress are scant. Sinai & Tikotzky (2012),

examined associations between parenting stress, maternal leave status and infant / parent sleep problems among families in Israel. Due to differences in social policy systems and cultural factors, it is therefore motivated to improve the understanding of possible influence on parents' experiences of parenting stress in relation to division of parental leave in the Swedish context.

Rationale for the thesis

A wealth of research has established the importance of contextual factors for parenting and interactions within the family, but the literature review presented above reveals several knowledge gaps that this thesis was designed to address. Previous research on how parental leave arrangements may affect parental roles and family processes from both parents' perspective is inconclusive (Hildingsson & Thomas, 2014; Oláh et al., 2018; Rehel, 2014). Especially, knowledge about consequences of division of parental leave from a psychological perspective is limited. It is not known how parents who share their parental leave equally experience the shift in caregiving when one parent goes back to work. An exploration of psychological processes within the family when parental leave is shifted, may contribute to further the understanding of the personal and relational meaning of sharing parenting leave equally, and the influence of equal sharing on parental roles and interactions. Furthermore, it is not known to what extent parental leave division is associated with psychological aspects of parenting and family life, such as parenting stress, coparenting, work-family balance, and the couple relationship. Increased understanding of these psychological aspects within the context of parents' division of parental leave is important because parental roles are settled early, and the way caregiving responsibilities are shared by the parents will probably set the stage for future family interactions.

Aims

Overall aim

The overall aim of this thesis was to explore how parents' division of parental leave influences parenting and family life from a psychological perspective. By focussing on both parents' experiences of equally shared parental leave and the shift in caregiving, parental roles and psychological processes within the family are explored. Psychological aspects also concern the influence of parents' division of leave on their wellbeing and interaction with each other, and on their engagement in working life. The key psychological aspects explored were: parenting stress, coparenting quality, work-family balance, and couple relationship quality.

Specific aims

The aim of Study I was to explore parents' experiences of equally shared parental leave (in proportion between 60/40 and 50/50 of the time). Specifically, this study focussed on the shift in caregiving, when mothers on parental leave returned to work and fathers took parental leave and entered the role as primary caregiver during the child's first year.

The aim of Study II was to explore the associations between division of parental leave and change in perceived parenting stress in parents of infants.

The aim of Study III was to explore the associations between division of parental leave and perceived quality of coparenting in parents of infants. In addition, we wanted to compare parents' work-family balance in terms of satisfaction with time on parental leave and time spent at work.

The aim of Study IV was to explore the associations between division of parental leave and change in perceived quality of the couple relationship in parents of infants, and whether this association is influenced by parenting stress or coparenting quality. We hypothesised that equal division of parental leave is positively associated with couple relationship quality (Hypothesis 1). Furthermore, this association should be mediated by parenting stress and coparenting quality (Hypothesis 2).

Summary of studies

The included studies are all based on the research project ‘Familjeliv och fördelning av föräldraledighet’ [Family life and division of parental leave], initiated by the PhD candidate for this thesis. The project was a collaboration between the Department of Psychology, University of Gothenburg, and the Research and Development Centre for Primary Care in Gothenburg.

The research group that initially designed and carried out the project consisted of a professor in psychology at the University of Gothenburg, an associate professor in psychology at the Research and Development Centre for Primary Care in Gothenburg primary care, and the author, a psychologist in Maternal and Child health care in Region Västra Götaland and PhD candidate in psychology at the University of Gothenburg. After the PhD candidate’s licentiate dissertation, an associate professor from the Research and Development Centre for Primary Care in Gothenburg has been involved in the project.

Methods

Study designs and setting

The studies in the thesis employ three different designs. To explore parents’ experiences of equally shared parental leave, a qualitative interview study was performed (Study I). To evaluate factors associated with division of parental leave and family life, two prospective, longitudinal studies were performed, based on self-report questionnaires at six months and 18 months after childbirth (Studies II and IV). A cross-sectional observational study, based on the same self-report questionnaires at 18 months after childbirth, was also performed (Study III).

All initial contact with the participating parents was achieved through collaboration with the Child health services (CHS), which offer health guidance, health examinations, vaccinations and parental support free of charge to all children aged 0-5 years (Swedish Child health services, 2020). The preventive programme includes health visits on a regular basis over time, and has a very high participation rate from families.

Parents of infants were recruited from CHS centres in the south-western part of the region Västra Götaland. Each CHS centre serves almost 100% of infants in their area, and covers both urban and suburban settings.

Participants and procedures

Study I

Mothers and fathers were recruited via four CHS centres. Couples who planned to share parental leave equally were approached by CHS nurses at the centres, informed about the study and asked to participate. To meet the inclusion criteria of equal division, each parent had to plan taking at least 40% to 60% of the couple's time on parental leave. Also, the shift in parental leave would have to have taken place before the child's first birthday.

Out of 13 couples that met the criteria for inclusion, 12 couples agreed to be interviewed. The participants were biological parents of 12 infants aged from 7 to 13 months when the interviews were conducted. The age of the parents varied from 27 to 40 years. All 24 participants were married or cohabiting with their partner and identified as heterosexual. Five couples were first-time parents and seven couples had two children. Almost all parents had Swedish as their mother tongue; one couple came from south-eastern Europe. A majority (21 out of the 24 parents) were highly educated. The mothers' mean duration of parental leave was 9.5 months (range 7.5–11.5 months) and the fathers planned to take 7 months (range 5–9 months) of parental leave on average.

The parents were interviewed individually during 30 to 60 minutes, six weeks after the couple had shifted parental leave. The interviews were carried out by the PhD candidate between June 2009 and May 2010, before the third quoted month was added.

Study II, III & IV

Parents of 4-month-old infants were invited to participate in the study by 58 nurses at 25 (of a total of 83) CHS centres in the county area. Inclusion criteria were that parents should be cohabiting and be fluent enough in the Swedish language to understand the questionnaires.

A total of 910 invited to participate, of which 748 participant parents consented to participate and were personally sent a web-based survey or a postal questionnaire (Figure 2), when the child was six months old (T1). After two reminders, 431 parents (255 mothers and 176 fathers, including 156 couples) completed the survey, a response rate of 57.8%. The follow-up survey at 18 months after childbirth (T2) was similarly distributed to the 431 parents who had responded to the first survey and to 86 of their partners who had not responded to the survey at T1, for a total of 517. After two reminders, 302 parents (176 mothers and 126 fathers) completed the second survey, a

response rate of 58.4 %. The analyses are based on the 280 parents (174 mothers and 106 fathers, 87 couples) who responded to both surveys.

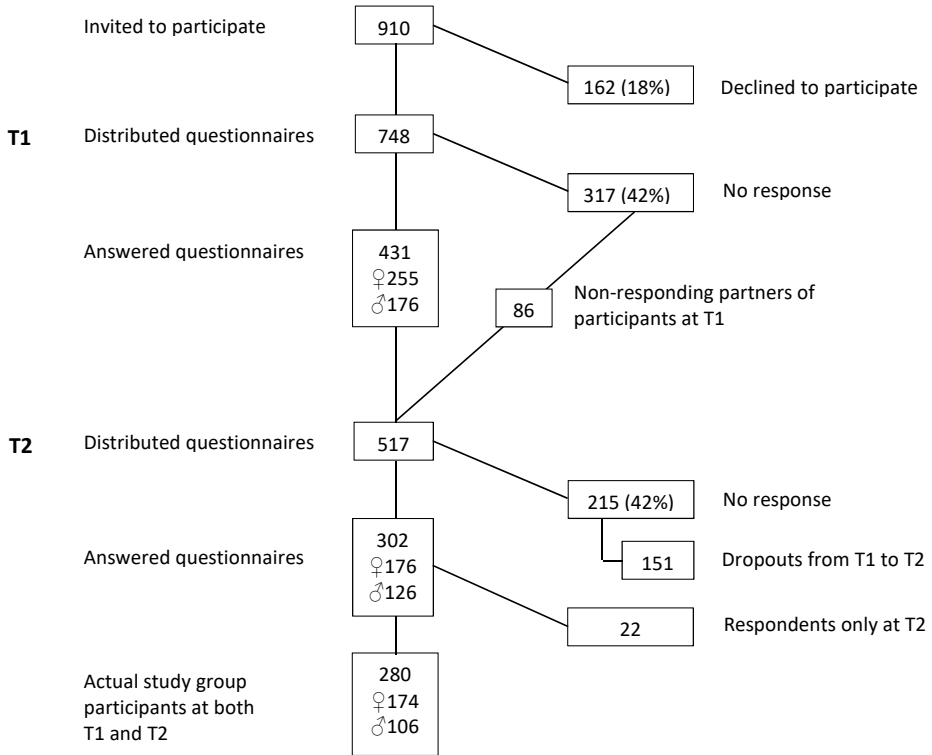


Figure 2. Flowchart of data collection at 6 months (T1) and 18 months (T2) after the child's birth.

The sample of parents who completed both surveys included a larger proportion of mothers who were first-time parents, in comparison with the proportion among those who participated in only the first survey (T1) [$\chi^2(1, n=255) = 4.47, p = .034$].

Parents were divided into two groups based on how they reported that they had shared the parental leave: Equal sharing (each parent taking 40% to 60% of the leave) and Non-equal sharing (one parent, generally the mother, taking more than 60% of the leave). The between-group demographic comparisons were performed slightly different in Study II versus Study III and IV, due to two variations on how the grouping of participants are presented.

In Study II, the equal and non-equal sharing groups, based on *planned* division of parental leave, had similar demographic characteristics; with one exception, no significant between-group differences were found. Significantly more fathers reported being on parental leave in the Equal sharing group at T1 [$\chi^2(1, n=109) = 7.77, p = .021$]. In Study III and IV, demographic data based on *reported* division of parental leave at T2, were similar in the Equal and Non-equal sharing groups (Table 1).

Table 1. Characteristics of participants 6 months after childbirth (T1), grouped by reported actual division of parental leave.

	Equal Sharing		Non-Equal Sharing		Total N = 280
	Mothers (n=88)	Fathers (n=55)	Mothers (n=86)	Fathers (n=51)	
<i>Age, mean (SD)</i>	33.93 (3.71)	35.62 (5.35)	33.02 (4.40)	35.29 (4.96)	33.92 (4.69)
<i>Experience of parenthood, n (%)</i>					
First-time parent	55 (62.5)	32 (58.2)	47 (52.1)	27 (52.9)	161 (57.5)
Parent with previous children	33 (37.5)	23 (41.8)	39 (45.3)	24 (47.1)	119 (42.5)
<i>Number of children, mean (SD)</i>	1.57 (0.79)	1.60 (0.78)	1.64 (0.84)	1.67 (0.84)	1.61 (0.81)
<i>Occupation, n (%)</i>					
Parental leave	72 (81.8)	6 (10.9)	75 (87.2)	1 (2.0)	154 (55)
Work and/or studies	3 (3.4)	45 (81.8)	2 (2.3)	47 (92.2)	97 (34.6)
Parental leave and work/studies	13 (14.8)	4 (7.3)	9 (10.5)	3 (5.9)	29 (10.4)
Unemployment	0	0	0	0	0
<i>Language, n (%)</i>					
Swedish	83 (94.3)	52 (94.5)	80 (93.0)	49 (96.1)	264 (94.3)
Other	5 (5.7)	3 (5.5)	6 (7.08)	2 (3.9)	16 (5.7)
<i>Education, n (%)</i>					
Upper secondary or below	9 (10.2)	11 (20.0)	13 (15.1)	13 (25.5)	46 (16.4)
University/ post-secondary	79 (89.8)	44 (80.0)	73 (84.9)	38 (74.5)	234 (83.6)

Parents were instructed to respond to the questionnaire individually. The survey took approximately 30 minutes to complete. Data were collected between January 2011 and January 2013, before the third quoted month was added.

Data collection

Interviews (Study I)

In this study, data were collected from individual, semi-structured interviews. An interview guide was used, consisting of questions regarding the incentives to share parental leave equally, experiences from the shift between parents, and the child's reaction to the shift of primary caregiver. Parents were also asked about reactions from their network and their need for support. Open-ended questions were followed by prompts, and the order of the questions was guided by the parents' narratives.

Questionnaires and outcomes measured (Study II, III, & IV)

In Study II, III, and IV data were collected when the child was six months old (T1), and for the follow-up survey at 18 months after childbirth (T2), using the same questionnaire. The questionnaire was purpose-constructed for this research and was available in both pen-and-paper format and a web-based format.

In Study II, the primary outcome was perceived parenting stress in relation to division of parental leave. This was operationalised as change in perceived parenting stress between T1 and T2, and measured with the Swedish Parenthood Stress Questionnaire (SPSQ) (Östberg et al., 1997). The SPSQ comprises 34 items on five subscales: Incompetence, Role restriction, Social isolation, Spouse relationship problems, and Health problems. The subscales form a Total SPSQ score, calculated as a mean value of all SPSQ items. Response options range from strongly agree to strongly disagree on a 5-point Likert scale. The SPSQ has been found to be reliable and valid for measuring parenting stress in parents of young children (Östberg, 1998; Östberg et al., 1997), and for the total scale Cronbach's alpha in the present study was 0.88 for both women and men. Cronbach's alpha for the SPSQ subscales ranged from 0.60 to 0.83 for mothers, and from 0.65 to 0.81 for fathers.

In Study III, the primary outcomes were perceived coparenting quality and work-family balance in relation to division of parental leave. Coparenting quality was operationalised as 1) parents' degree of having a working relationship with their child's other parent, measured with the Parenting Alliance Measure (PAM) (Abidin & Konold, 1999), and 2) how parents perceive their sharing of caregiving responsibilities, measured as satisfaction with their partner's involvement in caregiving. Work-family

balance was operationalised as parents' satisfaction with their time on parental leave, and their time spent at work.

The PAM contains 20 items on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The PAM has been found to be reliable and valid for measuring parenting alliance in parents of children aged 1-19 years (Abidin & Konold, 1999; Hurley et al, 2014). Cronbach's alphas in the current study were 0.94 for both women and men. Satisfaction with the partner's involvement in caregiving was measured as the sum of five items (feeding, putting to bed, soothing daytime, soothing at night, washing/changing diapers/changing clothes). The responses for each item were dichotomised into wanting more/less responsibility (-) and being satisfied with current level of responsibility (+).

In Study IV, the primary outcome was couple relationship quality in relation to division of parental leave. This was operationalised as change in perceived couple relationship quality between T1 and T2, and measured with the Quality of Dyadic Relationship instrument (QDR36) (Ahlborg et al., 2009). The QDR36 comprises 36 items divided into five dimensions: Dyadic consensus, Dyadic cohesion, Dyadic satisfaction, Dyadic sensuality, and Dyadic sexuality. Response options range from 1 to 6 on a Likert scale. Cronbach's alphas for the current sample were 0.94 for mothers and 0.91 for fathers.

In addition, the questionnaire included information about socio-demographic background factors, family life and work life situation (e.g. family composition, parental leave division, social support and occupational status), as well as information on the targeted child (birth time/weight, health, medical, or developmental problems). It was also possible to leave comments on some of the question areas, such as division of parental leave, parents' experiences or (dis)satisfaction concerning their situation, to give feedback on the survey or if parents wanted to add information.

Data analyses

Thematic analysis

In Study I, the interviews were analysed using thematic analysis with an explorative approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The inductive phenomenological method was chosen, with the aim of increasing understanding of parents' experiences of sharing parental leave equally. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data were coded on descriptive and conceptual levels, using an inductive approach. To test the

accuracy of the analysis, five interviews were coded independently by another psychologist as part of her specialist training. The few differences in the coding were discussed until codes were agreed upon. The descriptive codes were organised into groups, which were interpreted at a conceptual level and then sorted into preliminary themes. Thematic maps of themes, which captured important patterns of meaning within the data set, were discussed in a group of fellow researchers. The PhD candidate led the analysis and the organisation and naming of themes and subthemes was discussed and finalised by both researchers involved in this study. Each theme reflected the meaning and understanding of the parents' experiences, based on interpretation at the conceptual level of coding. QSR International's NVivo 9.0 software (2010) was used for coding and organising the data.

Statistical analyses

In Study II, III, and IV, the same procedures were applied in the statistical analyses of descriptive data, computed for all sociodemographic and study variables. The values of the continuous variables were summarised using means and standard deviations; categorical variables were summarised using frequencies and percentages. For between-group comparisons, chi-square tests were used for categorical data and One-Way ANOVA was computed for continuous data. To avoid within-couple influences, analyses were stratified by sex. Data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 25.0). An alpha level of $\alpha = 0.05$ was used for all statistical computations.

In Study II, associations between divisions of parental leave and perceived parenting stress were explored. We used the previously developed 5-factor subscale solution and calculated means and standard deviations for the subscales as well as for the Total SPSQ (Östberg et al., 1997). Multiple linear regressions were performed, with changes in parenting stress (Total SPSQ and subscales) from T1 to T2 as dependent variables. We adjusted for confounding factors, including being a first-time parent, occupation, education level, and speaking a language other than Swedish.

In Study III, associations between division of parental leave and perceived quality of coparenting were explored. We also compared parents' work-family balance in terms of satisfaction with time on parental leave and time spent at work 18 months after childbirth. Multiple linear regressions were performed, with PAM and satisfaction with the partner's involvement in caregiving at 18 months after childbirth as dependent variables. We adjusted for the same confounding factors as in Study II. In addition, we controlled for

factors related to work-family balance; time and satisfaction concerning parents' share of parental leave and working hours.

In Study IV, associations between division of parental leave and change in perceived quality of the couple relationship were explored (hypothesis 1), and whether this association is mediated by parenting stress or coparenting quality (hypothesis 2). To test hypothesis 1, multiple linear regressions were performed, with change in couple relationship quality from T1 to T2 as dependent variable. We adjusted for the confounding factor of being a first-time parent. To test hypothesis 2, we entered the potential mediators parenting stress and coparenting quality in a final, adjusted, model. Only parents who responded to all items in the three scales (QDR at T1 and T2, SPSQ and PAM at T1) were included in the regression analyses.

Ethical considerations

The studies were performed in accordance with ethical principles for medical research involving human subjects, as stated in the Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association, 2013).

For Study I ethics approval was, according to Swedish law and as confirmed by the Regional Ethics Review Board in Gothenburg, not necessary. All the parents received oral and written information about the study and provided written informed consent. If any participating parent expressed a need for parental support, they were asked to contact ordinary Child health care services or received guidance where to turn.

Study II, III, and IV were approved by the Regional Ethics Review Board in Gothenburg, reference number 431-10. The participants were not compensated in any way for their participation in the study.

Main findings

Parents' experiences of sharing parental leave equally

In Study I, the analysis of how parents experienced equally shared parental leave around the caregiver shift, led to the identification of the following three main themes with underlying subthemes:

1. Holding on to equal opportunities
 - 1.1. Guided by ideals
 - 1.2. Managing ambivalence
 - 1.3. Leaving work for family

2. Transition of responsibility and control
 - 2.1. Trust in the father
 - 2.2. Fathers' engagement facilitates the shift
 - 2.3. Getting control by taking the main responsibility

3. Gaining a mutual understanding
 - 3.1. Caregiving engulfs one's life
 - 3.2. Role swapping leads to mutual appreciation

The first theme, *Holding on to equal opportunities*, includes three subthemes describing how the process of shifting between caregivers was facilitated by a joint decision and a conviction of the importance of achieving close relations between the child and both parents. These beliefs guided parents when they met resistance, in terms of emotional strain, ambivalence and reactions from colleagues.

The second theme, *Transition of responsibility and control*, includes three subthemes describing mothers' strategies to let go of the primary caregiving responsibilities. The process of shifting between parents was facilitated by paternal involvement and by mothers trusting fathers' initiatives. Holding on to daily routines was an important strategy for fathers when taking over the caregiving responsibilities.

The third theme, *Gaining mutual understanding*, includes two subthemes describing consequences of how the shift between parents evoked a deeper understanding of each other's experiences. Swapping roles brought them perspectives on what it takes to share responsibilities in parenting and as dual breadwinners. Equally shared parental leave fostered a deeper

confidence in each other's parental roles and the mutual understanding was described as enriching the couple relationship.

These themes were present in all mothers' and fathers' narratives, regardless how the leave shift was planned and handled. The shift between the parents was described as relatively unproblematic, even though the process implied adaptation, challenges, and various degrees of emotional strain. In conclusion, the study's exploration of parents' experiences of equally shared parental leave, and the process of shifting primary caregivers, sheds light on the changing parental roles in modern family life.

Division of parental leave and parenting stress

The main finding of Study II was that fathers of young children who shared parental leave equally were less affected by parenting stress than those who shared unequally (adjusted B -0.20; 95% CI -0.33 to -0.06). Parental leave explained 12% of the variance in the change in parenting stress. Of the potentially confounding factors, only education was significant ($p = .018$). In mothers, no significant association was found between division of parental leave and parenting stress.

A closer analysis of the SPSQ's subscales for fathers revealed that equal division of parental leave was associated with lower perceived parenting stress in terms of *Incompetence* (in the parental role) and *Health problems*.

Division of parental leave, coparenting and work-family balance

The main finding of Study III was that both mothers and fathers who shared parental leave equally perceived higher coparenting quality at 18 months after childbirth. For mothers, being a first-time parent and weekly working hours were identified as potentially confounding factors, but when controlling for these factors the association between equal parental leave and PAM remained significant (adjusted B 3.90; 95% CI 0.05 to 7.76; $p = .047$). In the adjusted regression model, division of leave explained 4.2% of the variance in the parenting alliance for mothers. In fathers, the association between equal parental leave sharing and PAM was also significant (B 4.64; 95% CI 1.14 to 8.14; $p = .010$), and no potentially confounding factors was significant. Division of leave explained 6.5% of the variance in the parenting alliance.

In mothers, equally shared parental leave was significantly associated with higher satisfaction with partner's involvement in caregiving, and the significance remained in the adjusted model ($F(2, 163) = 3.81$; $p = .034$). In

fathers, no significant association was found between division of parental leave and satisfaction with partner’s involvement in caregiving.

Work-family balance, in terms of parental leave and weekly working hours, in relation to division of parental leave are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Parental leave and weekly working hours 18 months after childbirth, by division of parental leave.

	Mothers		Fathers	
	Equal sharing (n = 88)	Non-equal sharing (n = 86)	Equal sharing (n = 55)	Non-equal sharing (n = 51)
<i>Parental leave factor (months), mean (SD)</i>	10.70 (2.79) ^{*a}	14.54 (3.37)	7.87 (1.78) ^{*b}	2.97 (1.77)
<i>Weekly working hours, mean (SD)</i>	35.57 (6.48)	34.06 (8.95)	33.94 (10.27) ^{*b}	38.89 (10.07)

* $p < 0.05$

^a significant difference between mothers in the Equal sharing and Non-equal sharing groups

^b significant difference between fathers in the Equal sharing and Non-equal sharing groups

Parental satisfaction with time on parental leave and time spent at work, was also compared in relation to division of parental leave. Between-group comparisons of these variables showed that work-family balance was positively affected in both mothers and fathers by equally shared parental leave. For example, more fathers who shared parental leave equally were satisfied with their share of parental leave in comparison with those who shared unequally; $X^2(1, N = 102) = 8.02$, exact $p = .005$. Similarly, more mothers who shared parental leave equally were satisfied with their weekly time spent at work, than those who shared unequally $X^2(2, N = 131) = 6.73$, exact $p = .035$.

Division of parental leave and the couple relationship

The first hypothesis in Study IV, that equal division of parental leave is associated with higher couple relationship quality compared with unequal division of parental leave, was supported for fathers, but not for mothers. The regression analysis of changes in couple relationship quality from six to 18 months after childbirth showed that fathers who shared parental leave equally perceived higher couple relationship quality than those who shared unequally (B 0.87; 95% CI 0.12 to 1.61; $p = .023$). The model explained 6% of the variance in the change in couple relationship quality.

The second hypothesis was that the association between division of parental leave and perceived couple relationships quality is mediated by parenting stress and coparenting quality. This hypothesis was not supported for either of the genders, even if the association between division of parental leave and couple relationship quality in fathers remained significant in the final model, controlling for parenting stress and coparenting quality (B 0.91; 95% CI 0.16 to 1.67; $p = .019$). The mediation roles of parenting stress and coparenting quality perceived by fathers were not confirmed (B 0.36; 95% CI -0.64 to 1.36 for parenting stress, and B -0.02; 95% CI -0.07 to 0.04 for coparenting quality), indicating that these factors did not affect couple relationship quality.

Discussion

The purpose of this thesis was to explore how parents' division of parental leave influenced parenting and family life from a psychological perspective, with a focus on parents' experiences of equally shared parental leave and their shift in caregiving, and the links between division of parental leave and key psychological aspects: parenting stress, coparenting quality, work-family balance, and couple relationship quality. The main findings of the thesis are:

- Parents' experiences of equally shared parental leave and the shift between parents were reflected in processes to share equal opportunities for caregiving, which were facilitated by paternal involvement and mother's trust in the father's capability. Shared experiences seemed to increase the parents' mutual understanding and enriched the couple relation.
- Fathers who shared parental leave equally perceived less parenting stress 18 months after childbirth than those who did not share equally. This association was not found in mothers.
- Both mothers and fathers with experiences of equal division of parental leave perceived higher coparenting quality 18 months after childbirth. They also reported better work-family balance than parents who shared parental leave unequally. In mothers, equally shared parental leave was associated with higher satisfaction with their partner's involvement in caregiving.
- Fathers who shared parental leave equally perceived higher couple relationship quality 18 months after childbirth, than fathers who did not share parental leave equally. No such association was found in mothers.

The findings of the individual studies are discussed below, followed by a general discussion. Thereafter, methodological and ethical considerations of the studies are discussed, before implications and concluding remarks are presented.

Parents' experiences of sharing parental leave equally (Study I)

Study I explored parents' experiences of equally shared parental leave with a special focus on the shift between the parents when mothers on parental leave return to work and fathers take over the primary responsibility for the child. The main findings from the thematic analysis of the 24 interviews were the parents' experience of the shift as a process of sharing equal opportunities for caregiving by a transfer of responsibilities and control between the parents, and that paternal involvement preceding the shift was experienced by both parents as facilitating the process. The ideal that both parents could establish a close relationship to the child served as a motivational factor throughout the process of shifting responsibilities. The shared experiences promoted parents' mutual understanding in everyday life. Parents' experiences and interaction when sharing parental leave equally reflected transactions between multiple ecological systems, consistent with Bronfenbrenner's (2001) bioecological theory. The parents' narratives exemplify how cultural values of gender equality and preconditions by social policy at the macrosystem level are turned into practice through increased paternal involvement at the microsystem and mesosystem levels.

The themes developed in the thematic analyses included both similar and different experiences, and these various aspects contributed to a rich description of the process of shifting parental leave. The findings under each theme are discussed in the following section.

1) Holding on to equal opportunities

Holding egalitarian values and sharing parental leave equally could be considered a choice that brings positive social status (Duvander et al., 2017), which could be experienced at all ecological system levels. A joint decision to share parental leave equally seemed to be an important prerequisite for the interviewed parents at the mesosystem level. Their narratives did not indicate conflicts or difficult negotiations for the couples according to the division of parental leave. It is important to keep in mind that the participating parents were highly motivated and the positive attitudes from the outset had, without any doubt, an impact on the results. Similar patterns of high motivation and descriptions of shared parental leave as a natural choice to them have been described in studies on fathers' experiences of parental leave (Duvander et al. 2017; Johansson, 2011). Contrary to previous research (Haas & Hwang, 2019), the fathers' plans for their parental leave met resistance from few of the employers. Parents' decisions to share parental leave equally, which affect

microsystem, mesosystem and exosystem levels, have been encouraged through social policy at the macrosystem level by employers and others, and may be seen as an endorsement for the parents at all ecological levels. In that sense, the decision to share parental leave equally could be considered as within the norm, even if actual equal division of parental leave is outside the norm.

Nevertheless, especially mothers shared reflections on how they struggled to let go of responsibilities and control. The study confirms findings from two previous Swedish studies describing mothers' feelings of guilt based on their sense of being responsible for the child's needs (Elvin-Nowak, 1999), and the mothers' mental organising responsibility in the family, which occurred even during longer paternal leave (Almqvist & Duvander, 2014). However, some mothers also described relief when their responsibility decreased after the shift. The findings could be considered as differences in parental experiences, but might also reflect different views concerning mothers' parenting role.

2) Transition of responsibility and control

As parental roles are developed gradually and not always simultaneously, parents' interaction to support each other's parenting efforts is essential (Feinberg, 2003; Lamb, 2010). The positive support described in the second theme involves interactions at the mesosystem level. The mothers underlined their trust in their partner's parenting resources and gave examples of strategies at the mesosystem level that were meant to increase the partner's confidence and competence, when meeting the infants' needs at the microsystem level. This suggests a positive attitude towards the father taking over responsibility, described in previous research as 'gate opening behaviour' which suggests that these mothers are less likely to show 'maternal gatekeeping' behaviour (Olsavsky et al., 2019; Puhlman & Pasley, 2013). Since the mothers seem to act in accordance with their attitudes during the process of shifting responsibilities, this congruence between the macrosystem and mesosystem levels might contribute to beneficial dynamics in the family system.

Our findings suggest that mothers' strategies to put trust in fathers' capacity in parenting, could be facilitated by fathers' early engagement in the caregiving. The fathers' narratives bear testimony that they were already involved in the care of the infant before the shift of parental leave. The finding is confirmed by previous Swedish studies of fathers' incitements to be a caring father (Fägerskiöld, 2008; Johansson, 2011; Premberg et al., 2008).

In this way, transactions between mesosystem and microsystems levels seem to positively enforce the transition of caregiving responsibilities, which might explain parents' experiences of a smooth shifting. Nevertheless, the fathers' descriptions suggested that their parenting skills were improved as a result of an extended experience of caregiving activities after the shift. The present finding is in accordance with Lamb and Lewis' (2010) overview of gradually learned competence in infant care for both parents. Yet, in this regard fathers' parental roles seem to evolve more clearly during the shifting process than mothers' parental roles, Mothers might have settled their parental competence and confidence at an earlier stage in parenting.

The transition between parents was facilitated by the father's involvement, when the main responsibility for the child and the household was handed over from mother to father. The descriptions of fathers' experiences of being emotionally and practically responsible to a high degree are partly in agreement with the paternal involvement construct suggested by Pleck (2010). The main difference is the fathers' direct care, as distinct from the indirect care domain which was suggested in revision of the paternal involvement definition (Pleck, 2010). Moreover, our findings of fathers' engagement reflect a more direct responsibility, in contrast to solely providing material resources and more general responsibilities for the family's needs, as suggested in Pleck's definition of process responsibility as a domain in the concept of paternal involvement. Our findings are also in line with Doucet's definition of parental responsibilities in terms of emotional responsibility, defined as parents' caregiving and knowledge of the child's needs, including the ways parents assess the child's response (Doucet, 2015). In the continuum of process responsibility presented by Doucet (2006), fathers' engagement in the parenting role was classified as assistant, partner, or manager. The interviewed fathers in our study were seen more as managers than assistants, since they had had to plan for and manage the children's needs for a longer time. Mothers' support at the mesosystem level by encouraging their partner's initiatives and involvement, seems to positively influence fathers' parenting confidence at the microsystem level.

3) Gaining a mutual understanding.

Most fathers described that they had not anticipated the intensity of being at home with their infants, and in some case, older siblings. The shared responsibility made parents relate to similar experiences and seemed to increase the mutual understanding, which supports the findings of Almqvist et al. (2011). This understanding involves experiences from both the

microsystem and exosystem levels, which seems to benefit the interaction at the mesosystem level. The way parents shared experiences and described trust in each other's capacity as parents, resonates with a good quality coparenting relationship (Feinberg, 2003).

Finally, the parents' narratives depict the shift as a transforming experience that promoted a mutual understanding of each other. The parents gave different examples of how they recognised the partners' reactions and needs in everyday situations, because they have similar experiences and could relate to each other's mindset. This could be considered as transactions within and between microsystem levels, which might impact the family dynamics further at the mesosystem level. Yet, the interviews were made only once, six weeks after the shift, and parents' confidence in the shared experiences as a positive contribution to future family life is not possible to evaluate from this study.

Division of parental leave and perceived parenting stress (Study II)

Study II explored associations between division of parental leave and perceived parenting stress 18 months after childbirth. The main findings were that equally shared parental leave was associated with less parenting stress in fathers, but not in mothers. These findings suggest that fathers' involvement in family life seems to be positive for his wellbeing, in terms of less overall parenting stress, but also into his confidence as parent. The main findings could be considered as examples of transactions concerning parental roles within and between the microsystem, mesosystem, and macrosystem levels of importance for parents' wellbeing, based on their experiences of parenting (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Parenthood brings both expected changes and unanticipated experiences to the lives of parents. It has been suggested that parenting stress is a natural consequence of parenthood, affecting parents to different degrees, from normal levels to clinically relevant levels (Deater-Deckard, 1998). The parents' perceived parenting stress appeared to be similar at six months, regardless of how they planned to divide their parental leave. The levels of parenting stress found in our study were consistent with findings from previous Swedish studies on parents of infants (Hildingsson & Thomas, 2014; Widarsson et al., 2013). The subscale *Role restriction* showed the highest mean scores among parents at both six months and 18 months postpartum, in line with results from previous studies (Hildingsson & Thomas,

2014; Widarsson et al., 2013). It has been suggested that lack of time and fewer opportunities to maintain personal interests and activities might be experienced as problematic, if parents' expectations differ from a reality restricted by parental responsibilities (Andersson & Hildingsson, 2015). In our study, no associations were found between changes in *Role restriction* from six to 18 months and division of parental leave. In that respect, *Role restriction* could be considered as a general experience of parenting in early years, regardless of how parental leave was divided. Overall, considering the levels of parenting stress, our findings could be interpreted as signs of normal stress of parenting during the child's first years, rather than signs of hard strains.

Hildingsson & Thomas (2014) have drawn attention to the lack of knowledge on how decisions in family life concerning division of parental leave might contribute to parenting stress. Differences in levels of parenting stress between fathers were found based on changes from six to 18 months after childbirth. Fathers who shared parental leave unequally reported higher levels of parenting stress in general (*Total SPSQ*), *Incompetence* and *Health problems*, than fathers who shared their leave equally. In Sweden, most fathers meet expectations of being involved and capable of taking care of their infant, regardless of the period of parental leave (Gislason & Eydal, 2011). One possible explanation for this finding of higher levels of parenting stress both overall and on the *Incompetence subscale*, might be that fathers who shared parental leave unequally may have more limited caretaking experience or time with primary responsibility than fathers who shared leave equally. It could be that the demands associated with parenthood and fathers' generally lower experience of sole caretaking of an infant might contribute to higher levels of parenting stress among fathers who share their leave unequally. The established associations might reflect underlying patterns among equally sharing fathers' capacity to contemplate parenting, which might contribute to less perceived parenting stress. Differences in parenthood-related *Health problems*, such as fatigue and physical fitness, might reflect conflicting demands of family life and work life, which might have been more pronounced for non-equally sharing fathers. Premberg et al. (2008) reported similar challenging experiences by new fathers, when combining the role as provider and sharing family responsibilities. Yet, division of leave only explained 12% of the variance in the parenting stress, and other factors, not explored in this study, are likely to contribute to explaining the variance.

The finding that division of parental leave did not influence mothers' parenting stress was unexpected. Parenting stress in mothers has earlier been

linked to mothers' role as parent (Hildingsson & Thomas, 2014). Mothers' choices seem to influence the decision on couples' leave taking (Almqvist et al., 2011; Kaufman & Almqvist, 2017; McKay & Doucet, 2010), and might contribute to less parenting stress if mothers feel their wishes for division of parental leave are met. In that sense, mothers' parenting role seems to be acknowledged by her partner, but also strengthened by social values that mothers still are seen as the parent who sets the preconditions for parental roles based on her preferences. Yet, as societal values evolve into accentuated egalitarian ideals and expectations for fathers' involvement (Lomazzi et al., 2019), the findings indicate the importance for parents to find common ground in their negotiations of division of parental leave, if their wellbeing in terms of parenting stress is related to their partner's wishes.

Altogether, the main findings contribute to the understanding of how parenting stress occurs as reciprocal transactions within and between ecological systems at different levels, reflecting parental roles and experiences of parenting in the context of parental leave. Especially fathers' wellbeing in terms of parenting stress relates to their division of parental leave, and seems to be intertwined with their perception of their own parenting capacity, their involvement in caregiving, and their everyday life situation.

Division of parental leave and coparenting (Study III)

Study III explored family processes in terms of associations between division of parental leave and perceived coparenting quality, as well as parents' work-family balance 18 months after childbirth. The main findings were that division of parental leave was associated with higher coparenting quality in both mothers and fathers. In mothers, an association was also found between equally shared parental leave and higher satisfaction with their partner's involvement in caregiving. Both mothers and fathers were more satisfied with their work-family balance when they had experience of sharing parental leave equally, than those who shared unequally.

The study addresses family processes and the interface with working life, which puts the interplay between contextual settings in the limelight. In the interpretation of our results it is central to consider Bronfenbrenner's theory (1979), recognising the influence of cultural values and norms on family life and suggesting that family life reflects transactions between societal and personal levels. In addition, the bioecological theory implies the importance of acknowledging factors at the mesosystem level, such as

parents' interaction concerning caregiving responsibilities, which influences early family life (Bronfenbrenner, 2001). The interface with parents' working-life at the exosystem level explored in study III, contributed to a better understanding of transactions between family life and working life and proximal transactions between different ecological system levels.

The identified association in both mothers and fathers between equal division of parental leave and higher coparenting quality suggests that sharing parental leave equally is beneficial for parents' collaboration as a coparenting team, which is in line with earlier research. Murphy et al. (2017) found that fathers' support of mothers and greater involvement in parental decision making are associated with increased levels of dyadic cooperative coparenting. Parents' coordination of parenting responsibilities occurs through negotiations, and has been suggested to affect the coparenting relationship (Favez et al., 2016). The experience of sharing parental leave equally might contribute to parents' collaboration and trust in each other, which may be reflected in higher coparenting quality. Previous research also has shown that parents who share their parental leave unequally also have a more traditional division of responsibilities in the family (Oláh et al., 2014).

The small degree to which division of leave explained the variance in the parenting alliance means that the association between parental leave and coparenting must be interpreted with great caution and that there are other factors, not examined in this study, which also could contribute to explaining the variance.

The finding that fathers' satisfaction with their partner's involvement in caregiving was not associated with leave division is of particular interest, and may suggest that fathers feel content with their partner's parenting efforts regardless of their division of parental leave. Expectations of parental roles might assume mothers to be naturally involved in caregiving, even though parents' conflicting beliefs of the importance of the mother's role have been found to predict coparenting conflicts (Favez et al., 2016). However, our findings are more in line with recently described patterns of maternal gatekeeping in terms of gate opening behaviour (Olsavsky et al., 2019). This concept implies maternal gatekeeping behaviours that encourage and positively reinforce fathers' active parenting involvement, which corresponds with the fathers' viewpoints in our study that the mothers' caregiving involvement was unproblematic. Yet, our findings reveal that from the mothers' point of view, their satisfaction with their partner's involvement in caregiving differed, in relation to division of parental leave. Mothers who shared the parental leave equally were most satisfied with their partners'

caregiving. This finding might indicate that when ideals of gender equality are put into practice, parental roles and the caregiving responsibilities are affected.

The findings regarding parents' work-family balance (Table 2) revealed that fathers' who shared parental leave unequally, spent more time at work (*Unequal* $M=38.89$, $SD\ 10.07$, versus *Equal* $M=33.94$, $SD\ 10.27$, $p <.05$). This is in line with previous findings that fathers' working time was reduced by a longer period of parental leave (Almqvist & Duvander, 2014; Duvander & Jans, 2009; Haas & Hwang, 2008; Haas & Hwang, 2012). It also confirmed findings that the ideal of gender equality is associated with reduced working hours in fathers (Larsson & Björk, 2017). Yet, the reported weekly working time also indicates that among fathers who shared parental leave unequally, the engagement varied from part time work to more than full time work. This might be explained by the high flexibility in the parental leave system, which makes it possible to combine time at work and parental leave in different ways. The reported 'parental leave factor' (Table 2) indicates that fathers with experience of unequal division of parental leave had at least a period of time on parental leave ($M=2.97$ months, $SD\ 1.77$). It is important to note that the experience of parental leave is not dichotomous in terms of equal and non-equal sharing. The fact that non-equally sharing fathers took parental leave for a period of time that could be viewed as considerable in an international comparison (Koslowski et al., 2019), underlines the importance of recognising the influence of social policy at the macrosystem level, when parental roles at the microsystem and mesosystem levels are discussed.

Division of parental leave and the couple relationship (Study IV)

Study IV explored associations between division of parental leave and change in perceived couple relationship quality 18 months after childbirth. The main findings were that division of parental leave was associated with higher perceived couple relationship quality in fathers who shared parental leave equally, and that no such significant association was found in mothers. The hypothesised mediating role of parenting stress and coparenting could not be confirmed.

Our main findings could serve as one example of transactions between personal and contextual environments proposed in Bronfenbrenner's (2001) bioecological theory. Parental roles are formed over time in response to

contextual conditions and fathers' experiences from an equal division of the parental leave seem to influence their satisfaction with the couple relationship quality as processes concerning family functioning are formed and evolve.

Entering parenthood can be considered a life-changing transition. Previous family research has described considerable challenges for couples, and a subsequent increase in risk of strains in the couple relationship (e.g. Mitnick et al., 2009). Our findings suggest that parents' levels of perceived relationship quality slightly decrease from six to 18 months after childbirth, in line with the trend reported in a similar Swedish context during transition to parenthood (Bäckström et al., 2018), with the exception of fathers who shared parental leave equally. Parents' scoring on the total QDR36 index and its three subscales suggests that both mothers and fathers who shared parental leave equally perceived their relationship quality most positively. However, only fathers' experiences of equally shared parental leave significantly contributed to a greater change in the couple relationship in general (QDR36 index) from six to 18 months after childbirth. This finding is supported by previous Swedish research on fathers' satisfaction with how much parental leave they used and with their couple relationship (Brandén et al., 2016).

Higher couple relationship quality among fathers who shared leave equally seemed to become evident over time, when they had experienced being the primary caregiver for a longer period of time. This finding is supported by previous research suggesting that experiences of shared parental leave increase parents' understanding of each other's everyday life (Almqvist et al., 2011; Duvander et al., 2017).

Mothers' perceptions of the couple relationship were not affected in the same way, although previous research has indicated the importance of fathers' involvement for mothers' perception of couple relationship quality (McClain & Brown, 2017). This lack of association between parental leave division and mothers' perceived couple relationship quality may indicate that mothers feel content with their choices regarding the division of leave and that mothers' share of the leave is not important for how they perceive their couple relationship. This kind of 'mother-led' decisions about division of parental leave (McKay & Doucet, 2010) might indicate that primary caregiving responsibility generally is more pronounced for mothers than for fathers. However, it is central to keep in mind that contextual settings regarding access to parental leave vary widely among countries (Koslowski et al., 2019), which might influence parents' expectations for the division of parental leave.

The study design and the analysis sought to use the findings from Study I-III in exploring, by means of the second hypothesis, whether parenting stress and/or coparenting quality could mediate the influence of parental leave division on couple relationship quality. This was an attempt to integrate findings from previous research and our findings from Study II and III into a better understanding of how the couple relationship might be affected in a broader sense. However, no support was found for the second hypothesis, and the potential influence of other factors on the couple relationship needs to be further investigated.

Although an association was established, the causality between division of parental leave and couple relationship quality is not known. Yet, the interactions within the couple relationship at the mesosystem level, the influence of preconditions given by Swedish family policies at the macrosystem level, and parents' division of parental leave at the microsystem level, have been initially explored. This study contributes important knowledge about the consequences of division of parental leave for relationship satisfaction, when equal sharing of parenting responsibilities is put into practice.

General discussion

Family life is influenced by societal factors, and the Swedish parental leave system brings contextual preconditions and opportunities to personal decisions about parental involvement in early childhood for both women and men. Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory (1979, 1994) was used as an underlying theoretical framework for this thesis. The theory highlights the influential and transactional dynamics between different systems from societal to personal levels. The presented findings contribute to increased understanding from a psychological perspective of the dynamics of parental roles within the family and of parents' interface with working life, for different division of parental leave. Even if the bioecological theory could be considered rather general, it can, through the overarching perspective, shed light on contextual life conditions given by social welfare programmes, such as the Swedish parental leave system.

The issue of whether division of parental leave is only an individual choice, can serve as an example to illustrate the complexity from a bioecological perspective. The opportunity to even have paid parental leave depends on prerequisites in the societal context at the macrosystem level,

which varies highly in an international perspective (Duvander & Löfgren, 2019). This thesis is based on the well-established parental leave system in Sweden, which is implemented by law. Having some parental leave is acknowledged in the public eye as an expected consequence of becoming a parent. Fathers' share of parental leave is large from an international perspective, and parents' shared involvement in caregiving is communicated in media and official publications as a successful example of gender equality put into practice (Johansson & Klinth, 2008).

Yet, the issue of parental leave is more complex from different perspectives. Even if social policy entitles each parent the right to parental leave, factors from all ecological levels come into play. Previous research has shown that parents use of parental leave is highly associated with social and economic factors (Duvander & Viklund, 2019; Ma et al., 2019), yet other factors also need to be considered in the understanding of parents' opportunities and preferences concerning division of parental leave.

First and foremost, values and norms at the societal (macrosystem) level affect the division of parental leave (Lomazzi et al., 2019). The debate about parental leave raises emotions and reflects strong opinions, often associated with questions of personal freedom in relation to regulations in terms of the earmarked quota, or statements about the necessity of shared responsibilities for the childcare. For the latter opinion the parental leave system regulations may be welcomed and may even be seen as insufficient incitements to drive development of gender equality at a societal level. Whatever stance is taken, these issues reflect transactions between the social, macrosystem level and the personal, microsystem level, and the division of parental leave bears consequences at all levels.

Furthermore, the dynamic in the couple's relationship is reflected in their negotiations about division of parental leave. For example, parents may argue about demands associated with parental responsibilities and how these shall be met by their leave taking. Arguments on gender inequalities associated to macrosystems, mesosystems and microsystems levels may be featured in such discussions or conflicts. The thesis' topic involves matters of gender norms. For this reason, an alternative theoretical perspective for the thesis could have been a gender theoretical approach, contrasting parents' choices concerning parental leave in terms of values, norms, gender roles, and hierarchical hegemonies. Since previous psychological studies on parental leave from both parents' perspective are scant, this thesis aimed to use an open and explorative approach, and approaches from critical theory on gender practices were not chosen.

Three overarching aspects of parenting and parental leave should be briefly addressed. The first aspect concerns the issue of whether the gender of the parent really matters when it comes to parenthood. In the Introduction section, previous research was presented concerning both genders' opportunities and preconditions for involved parenthood. Mothers' and fathers' parental roles can be viewed as complementary or similar in relation to the child (Cabrera et al., 2014; Pleck, 2010). Nevertheless, the parenting constructs of mothering and fathering seem to underline differences in expectations of parental roles, e.g. the fact that mothers' involvement has been taken for granted and not been conceptualised or studied in the same way as fathers' involvement. The conceptualisation of parenting reflects gendered parental roles, rather than genders' capacity in parenting (Fagan et al., 2014). The context of the Swedish parental leave system's opportunity for fathers to take parental leave includes the premise that both parents are capable of being primary caregivers and that close relationships to both parents are important for the child's well-being (Gislason & Eydal, 2011).

Furthermore, the heteronormative dominance must also be recognised when equality in family life is discussed in terms of mothers and fathers. A gender-neutral approach was employed in the data collection; yet the number of participating same-sex parents was too small (less than five) for them to be analysed separately. The author of this thesis considers parental roles to be socially constructed and influenced by the contextual settings, although the capacity to parent is not limited to special roles based on gender or family constellations. For the individual child, frequent and high-quality parental support, irrespective of whether by the mother or the father, provides good opportunities in life for the child (Cabrera et al., 2007; Lamb, 2010). For the individual parent, a close and secure relationship with the child is often the main answer to the question of what they want to achieve in their parental role (Lamb, 2010). Each parent has to consider what kind of opportunities and consequences their division of parental leave may have in the long term, in relation to their values and life situation. Parents could take Doucet's (2006) continuum of process responsibility into consideration: the classification of fathers as managers, partners, or assistants, depending on their paternal role and involvement. That kind of classification would probably not be applicable to mothers. In that sense, parents need to recognise different expectations of parental roles, which will be reflected in their negotiations and actual division of parental leave.

The second aspect relates to the parents' roles in caregiving in terms of actual time spent with the infant, and the division of parental leave. The

parental leave system in Sweden is highly flexible, making it possible to combine family life and working life in many ways. The ways parents arrange their parental leave therefore vary considerably. In addition to time on parental leave, parents may have working hours that allow them to share caregiving responsibilities on a daily basis. This means that parents' time and involvement in the caregiving of the child is not always reflected in their actual division of parental leave (Eriksson, 2019). Moreover, mostly mothers prolong their period of parental leave when paid and unpaid days on parental leave are combined (Duvander & Viklund, 2019). When parents choose how to divide parental leave, their values, norms, traditions, preconditions in working life, and opportunities should be considered. However, there are patterns concerning the take-up of parental leave that are strongly gendered, with most mothers taking the major share of the parental leave. Previous research has shown that these patterns reflect responsibilities for caregiving within the family (Almqvist & Duvander, 2014; Oláh et al., 2018).

The third aspect concerns the concept of equality, which is considered from both quantitative and qualitative perspectives in this thesis. Regarding our findings, one central question must be considered: what does equality from a psychological perspective mean in the context of parental leave? Can increased paternal involvement during equally shared parental leave be considered to reflect equal parenting? We have explored parents' experiences of parental leave, which have provided them with different amounts of time with their child. To be present, not just in time, but also *over* time emotionally for the child, brings relational consequences for the parent-child interaction within the family system. To be able to meet the child's needs by nurturing and caring actions strengthens the parents' confidence in the parental role (Lamb, 2010). In a deeper sense, equal prerequisites in parenting seems to depend on parents' interactions within and between ecological microsystems. In terms of coparenting, mutual support and respect for each other's parenting efforts are central for the interactions between parents at the mesosystem level, which could enhance equally shared responsibilities (Buckley & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2010). And conversely: equally shared responsibilities reinforce the coparenting relationship through transactions between all ecological levels. A working parenting alliance contributes to each parent's capacity to be "a good enough parent", which brings positive conditions for the child's upbringing, as stated in Convention of the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989).

Taken together, these different aspects are intertwined in family life and concern the way parental roles could be understood in the context of parental

leave. The thesis' findings might be synthesised into the following conclusions: Our findings suggest that division of parental leave is related to psychological aspects of parenting and family life concerning parental roles, parents' interactions and wellbeing in work-family balance. Paternal involvement and parents' interactions, around the shift of parental leave (Study I) might contribute to better prerequisites for the coparenting relationship and work-family balance, in line with our findings in Study III. Parents with experience of equally shared parental leave expressed that they gained a better understanding of each other. This finding was supported for fathers, in Study IV, confirming that fathers who shared parental leave equally perceived their couple relationship quality positively. Fathers described that they had learnt to better meet their child's needs after gaining more experience in caregiving. This finding was confirmed in Study II, as fathers who shared parental leave equally perceived less parenting stress than fathers who shared unequally. For mothers, the lack of associations between equal parental leave and parenting stress or couple relationship quality, might reflect a greater influence on the couples' division of parental leave based on preferences for mothers' parenting role. Swedish parents have equal opportunities to share parental leave since almost a half century, yet parental roles evolve and need to be further explored in the context of parental leave.

Methodological considerations and ethical reflections

In the process of outlining the contributing psychological aspects of parenting and family life focussed in this thesis, several concepts from different psychological perspectives were considered. In the review of previous research, several knowledge gaps were identified. When designing the studies included in this thesis, the feasibility of addressing these gaps were considered (e.g. availability of validated/translated measures in Swedish). Since the thesis aimed to explore family processes from both parents' perspectives, psychological aspects of parenting and family life were chosen that focussed on parenting experiences, parents' wellbeing and processes between parents. Besides the explorative approach of parents' experiences of equally shared parental leave, the following key psychological aspects of parenting and family life were chosen: parenting stress, coparenting quality, work-family balance, and couple relationship quality.

These key aspects in relation to division of parental leave is an emerging psychology research field, which can be considered both a strength

and a limitation of this thesis. Few previous studies have been conducted into how these psychological aspects are linked to division of parental leave, and none from a Swedish context. This strengthens the rationale for this research project, but limits the possibilities of comparing our findings to other research. In addition, studies on both parents' experiences of *equally* shared parental leave and its consequences on family processes are scarce (O'Brien & Wall, 2017). Since the context is central for the understanding of parenting, social factors and cultural context were closely considered when discussing our findings in relation to previous research.

Bearing contextual factors in mind was one strategy used to handle the paucity of studies on the influence of parental leave division from a psychological perspective. This was done by acknowledging difficulties in comparisons between studies from different contexts, and raising the issues of external validity and generalisability of our results to other contexts. Yet, the ambition to use an explorative approach with broad contextual perspectives in the study of parenting experiences, can be considered twofold. It is both a strength from a bioecological theory perspective, and a limitation since the research field this thesis addresses involves complex processes between personal and societal levels, rather than one clearly defined phenomenon (Bronfenbrenner, 2001; Patton, 2002).

When exploring psychological aspects of parenting and family life in the context of parental leave division, it is pertinent to use multiple methods as well as inductive and deductive approaches in order to capture parents' experiences from different perspectives. Therefore, both qualitative and quantitative methods were employed for this thesis' data collection, i.e. semi-structured interviews (Study I) and self-report questionnaires (Studies II to IV). The mix of data provides the advantage of covering broad dimensions of parents' experiences and family processes, which contribute to an understanding of parenting in transaction with social policies that encourage both parents' involvement and dual breadwinning. Data collection for the interview study (Study I) was carried out first in the research project. The explorative approach was used to meet the aim of the study, but also to provide information on important issues that the parents dealt with regarding division of parental leave. In that way, qualitative data were taken into consideration when setting the outline of the questionnaires (Study II to IV). The appropriateness of the chosen methods to meet the aim of the thesis was strengthened by pilot studies prior to both data collections.

A major strength of the thesis is that data from both mothers and fathers were collected for all studies (Study I to IV). Also, each study included

both first-time parents and parents with more than one child. A shortcoming in all four studies is that the participating parents were mainly middle-class, highly educated parents. The recruiting process further contributed to a selection bias since only Swedish-speaking parents were invited to participate. This bias may have been avoided, had the project had resources to interpret interviews and translate questionnaires. It is likely that these sociodemographic variables influence the parents' values towards more egalitarian opinions, as gender equality attitudes have been shown to vary by class and ethnicity (Almqvist et al., 2011; Duvander, 2014; Duvander et al., 2017; Lomazzi et al., 2019). Furthermore, economic considerations and establishment on the labour market come into play in parents' decisions on parental leave. All these factors are likely to affect the parents' experiences and outcomes studied, and the results may have been different if the sample had been more diversified and less resourceful. The limited representativeness of the sample must therefore be considered in the generalisation of findings, and findings should be interpreted with caution. In addition to the issues concerning validity, the fact that the samples are not fully representative of parents of infants in Sweden could be considered an ethical dilemma, as less resourceful groups of parents seldom are recognised and represented in non-clinical psychological research on contemporary family life.

Study I

To assure credibility, which contributes to trustworthiness in qualitative studies (Patton, 2002), two pilot interviews were conducted with parents who had experiences of sharing parental leave equally. The pilot interviews were explorative and retrospective over the full period of parental leave, and provided insights into the challenge of calling attention to psychological processes while summarising a wide range of experiences over time. To address this challenge, the focus of the interview study was narrowed to the shift of parental leave between the parents as primary caregivers. This was done with the intention of elucidating parents' experiences and psychological processes from a limited period of their parental leave. Consequently, the semi-structured interview guide was developed to be suitable for an inductive approach that was used to capture the participants' reflections on the topic.

Another consideration from the pilot interviews emerged when the PhD candidate had reason to question her own assumption concerning parents' need to seek support from the Child health service during the process of shifting parental leave. This preconception was probably influenced by her

own experience as a clinical psychologist. Before the first interview in Study I, a note of presumptions about equally shared parental leave was also made to gain insights into unconscious personal bias, following guidelines for qualitative research (Patton, 2002). This consideration was intended to strengthen trustworthiness of the study in terms of confirmability in the way interviews were conducted and findings interpreted (Patton, 2002).

The number of qualitative interviews could be considered as both a strength and limitation according to qualitative methodology, which has no general rules for sample size. The relatively large number (24) of interviews was motivated to get a breadth in the descriptions of the parents' experiences of equally shared parental leave, which can be informative in an explorative approach (Patton, 2002). On the other hand, the ideographic descriptions were limited which means that an interpretative phenomenological method could not be used; something that would have been possible with fewer participants. Instead an inductive phenomenological approach was applied, which aimed to provide a broader understanding of the parents' experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process of coding and analysis was performed on a semantic and conceptual level without any far-reaching interpretations of the latent content. The opportunity to have five of the interviews independently coded, followed by discussions about the differences, alternative interpretations, and the final organisation of the themes, contributed to improving clarity in the analysis. This was also a strategy used to minimise the influence of personal bias.

The participants in Study I were recruited as a non-clinical sample for interviews, based on parents' choice to share parental leave equally. Some ethical dilemmas may occur in qualitative interviewing. The individual interviews were carried out mostly at the families' homes, based on the parents' preferences. Interviewing both parents in a couple requires ethical awareness to not unintentionally communicate (verbally or non-verbally) any information one of the parents has shared, even if the other parent refers to issues that they believe their partner have mentioned. In case the partner was present at home, it was possible to conduct the interviews in privacy, which was considered a necessary prerequisite. Being a guest welcomed into the participants' home created a special challenge to keep the explorative approach into issues which might be of a sensitive nature. Patton's list of ethical issues (2002, pp. 408-409) recognise such dilemmas as 'data collection boundaries', important to consider when participants respond with some discomfort. To my awareness, there was no situation during the interviews which awakened such major difficulties in regard to ethical conduct. The

interviews were not conducted in a questioning or confronting manner intending to reveal any unspoken, less politically correct, opinions, as is advocated from a gender critical view of methodology (Magnusson, 2006; Patton, 2002).

Study I describes the process of shifting parental leave as the parents experienced the situation at six weeks after their shift of parental leave. Alternatively, fewer couples could have been followed over time with several interviews, during their whole period of parental leave. Due to the paucity of previous studies that address both parents' experiences of equally shared parental leave, a closer, explorative approach of the 'starting point' was chosen. Qualitative methodology does not per se have the intent to compare or to generalise results to other settings. Still, efforts were made to provide clear descriptions of methods and setting so that transferability would be enhanced, and trustworthiness of the study further strengthened (Pattons, 2002).

Study II to Study IV

In the pilot preceding the quantitative data collection, some parents provided feedback on the structure, content, and scope of the questionnaire in telephone interviews. The parents' opinions guided some minor revisions to improve clarity. The standardised scales that were included in the questionnaire have either been validated in a Swedish context (Study II: SPSQ; Study IV: QDR36), or translated into Swedish and used with permission (Study III: PAM). The instruments chosen have shown stable psychometric qualities with good validity and reliability. Potential ethical dilemmas were considered, especially regarding the items in the instrument for couple relationship quality (QDR, used in Study IV) that addressed questions about sexual intimacy. However, no parents in the pilot found these subscales irrelevant, or too private to answer; nor did any of the participating parents' comments in the subsequent data collection (for Study II to IV) concern any ethical issues in the questionnaire.

A limitation of the questionnaire that emerged with hindsight was its length. One reason for collecting detailed information was the great flexibility of the parental leave system, which resulted in several questions on parents' allocation of time on parental leave in order to map out their used, ongoing, and planned time on parental leave at six months and 18 months after childbirth. The exhaustive analysis of actual time on parental leave was motivated from our interest in getting information about which of the parents

that had actually stayed at home with the infant, instead of relying on registered parental benefit days which do not always reflect actual time on parental leave (Duvander & Viklund, 2019). A less extensive survey would probably have gained better completion and higher response rates, and might have reduced the high proportion of highly educated parents in the sample.

The relatively low response rate (about 58%) in each of the two surveys could raise questions about the representativeness of the sample. The 280 parents who responded to both surveys at six and 18 months after childbirth were presumably interested in the topic and motivated to participate, which might contribute to stronger opinions or a need to seek corroboration for the division of parental leave they had undertaken. In other words, parents who shared parental leave equally may have been more keen on responding to the survey, which might explain the high proportion of equally sharing parents in our sample. Other possible psychological differences between participants and drop outs cannot be ruled out.

The potential non-independence of couples' answers might be another limitation. The survey was individually sent to each parent, but it is possible that they discussed the questions even if they were instructed to answer individually. We do not know how this might have influenced parents' (individual) evaluation of different aspects of their situation. Still, the proportion of couples did not differ between the groups. Some participating parents commented that they found the survey to be an opportunity to reflect on their own situation and experiences. It could be considered a strength that the survey awoke interest, but this interest may have increased the risk of intercouple dependence if the couple had discussed the issues while answering the questionnaires. Stratifying the analyses by gender was a strategy used to address this potential intercouple dependence.

Another issue regarding the performance of statistical analyses concerns the parents' group affiliation. Based on parents' data, group affiliation was adjusted for 35 participants in accordance with their reported parental leave at 18 months. This aspect was a central motive for the construction of the outcome variable as a change score between T1 and T2, enabling analysis of groups over time and strengthening the statistical analyses in Study II and IV.

Another limitation pertains to the nature of self-report measures, and the tendency for social desirability bias (Streiner & Norman, 2008). The tendency of answering questions in a socially favourable direction is a known phenomenon when it comes to life style choices, which are highly influenced by social values. This tendency could differ between social groups and classes regarding division of parental leave, and its social status based on values.

Parents' ideological motives for division of parental leave likely influenced their tendency to answer questions in line with their values. With regard to social class, the homogeneity of the sample, with no between-group differences in terms of education level, could be considered a strength. Research on survey methodology has found parental assessment of parenting to be especially influenced by social desirability (Morsbach & Prinz, 2006). Since the questionnaire's measures of parenting stress and coparenting quality do not focus on parental shortcomings in parenting capacity related to child behaviour problems and the sample is considered as non-clinical, the validity of self-reported data on SPSQ (Study II) and PAM (Study III) might be less influenced by these factors.

Further methodological considerations concern the outcome measures used in Study III. The measure PAM is quite crude without subscales, in comparison with the instruments used in Study II (SPSQ) and Study IV (QDR36). In later years multifaceted scales have been developed to operationalise the concept of coparenting, and frequently used in family studies (e.g. Feinberg et al., 2012). At the time of data collection, PAM was the most suitable alternative for measuring coparenting quality that had been translated into Swedish, with good psychometric properties and a short format. We found the combination of parents' reported satisfaction with their partners' involvement in caregiving a fruitful way to broaden the operationalisation of the outcome coparenting. Furthermore, the outcome of work-family balance was constructed to meet the aim of the study and is based on parents' self-reported time on parental leave and weekly working hours, as well as their satisfaction with their share of this time. The combination of data on nominal and ordinal levels contributed to strengthening our take on the concept of work-family balance.

A cross-sectional design was used in Study III instead of a prospective longitudinal design, because it was considered the best approach to explore concerns about work-family balance from both parents' perspective. These issues were only possible to explore at the time of the follow-up survey (18 months after childbirth). At six months after childbirth, the vast majority of mothers were still on parental leave, and matters of work-family balance was not applicable for both parents. Even if the findings based on linear regression analyses do not allow any conclusions of causality, Study III contributes presentations of parents' experiences that have not previously been explored.

Last but not least, the issue of causality must be acknowledged also in relation to participating parents' attitudes, values, motivation, and

interpersonal resources when considering our findings. Although associations have been found, this does not say anything about causality. It might be that parents with personal resources in strong relationships are more prone to put their ideals of equality into practice by sharing parental leave (and they would probably handle challenges in early family life regardless of division of parental leave). Conversely, experiences from equally shared parental leave might lead to empowering processes which benefit parents' wellbeing, parental roles and relationships. Whether there are underlying psychological factors that enforce parents' selection of different division of parental leave should be further investigated.

Implications for practice, policy, and future research

This thesis provides new knowledge from a psychological perspective on division of parental leave between parents, and may have implications for the discussion about parental roles in antenatal and child health care settings, such as parenting classes. Parents' should be offered the opportunity to reflect on how their decisions on division of parental leave could benefit their family life and support of each other as parents. Parents need to be aware of how their negotiations of family responsibilities may affect their couple relationship and wellbeing. They also need to consider how they want to balance conflicting demands in family- and working life. These topics would be relevant to discuss in relation to their social and cultural context, and might help parents prevent conflicts from becoming chronic, in the dynamics of family life.

Professionals who support families may benefit from awareness of the circumstances and processes related to parental leave and parents' division of the parental leave. Healthcare professionals need to make efforts to notice parents' reactions and adaptation in the process of transition when parental leave is shared between parents, and adapt their support to the varying needs of parents showing signs of parenting stress or strain in their couple relationship. The findings underscore that particularly fathers should be paid attention to and included in both antenatal and postnatal visits, to a greater extent than what is done today.

Policymakers must acknowledge parents' experiences of how (un)equality in time on parental leave influences their wellbeing and relationships within the family, as well as the parents' work-family balance. Application of these findings could contribute in future policy design, by support of opportunities for equal parenting in early years. These findings

from the Swedish context may be relevant in discussions about the influence from prerequisites given by different family policy programmes.

In light of the results from this thesis, we need to learn more about how social policy influences parental roles and psychological processes within the family and in the context of dual breadwinning. Future research could:

- further explore psychological aspects of parents' experiences of shared (and not shared) parental leave with a focus on parental roles over longer period of time.
- replicate the studies of this thesis in a larger, less resourceful sample, and explore possible mechanisms underlying the influence of division of parental leave on perceived parenting stress, coparenting quality, and couple relationship quality in parents of young children.
- explore the thesis' focus in other family constellations
- explore parent-child relationships and infants' attachment relations in the context of parental leave.
- investigate the wider implications of division of parental leave and work-family balance, e.g. combinations of parental leave and part-time work for both parents of infants or toddlers.

Concluding remarks

Family life is highly influenced by reciprocal interactions within the family and by many contextual factors in transactions between ecological systems at different levels, such as social policy systems and working life. The parental leave system in Sweden enables both parents to have a caregiving role in family life combined with the role as breadwinner. The thesis provides increased understanding of parents' experiences of equally shared parental leave and new psychological knowledge on parents' perceived parenting stress, coparenting quality, work-family balance, and couple relationship quality, in relation to how parental leave is divided between parents.

The main findings from the thesis' studies suggest that:

(I) experiences from the shift of caregiving responsibilities between parents of infants enrich the couple relation through shared experiences and better understanding, when parental leave is shared equally and paternal involvement is encouraged by mothers.

(II) fathers with experiences from equally shared parental leave reported less parenting stress at 18 months after childbirth, than fathers who had less caregiving experience and divided parental leave unequally. This association was not present in mothers.

(III) both parents' coparenting quality and work-family balance at 18 months after childbirth are positively related to equal division of parental leave. For mothers, but not fathers, equally shared parental leave is associated with satisfaction with their partner's involvement in caregiving.

(IV) equal division of parental leave is associated with higher perceived couple relationship quality 18 months after childbirth, in fathers. Division of parental leave does not seem to influence mothers' perception of the couple relationship quality in the same way. Neither parenting stress nor coparenting quality seems to mediate the relation between couple relationship quality and division of parental leave.

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