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article

Perceptions of gender equality and engaged fatherhood among young fathers: parenthood and the welfare state in Sweden and the UK

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This article presents analyses from an international empirical study of young fatherhood in Sweden and the UK to interrogate how welfare contexts and family policies shape young fathers' views of parenthood. Our analyses demonstrate that despite differences in constructions of young fatherhood, whereby young parenthood is problematised in UK family policy, more so than in Sweden, young fathers in both countries express an encouraging commitment to contemporary cultural imperatives for engaged fatherhood. However, differences in welfare and parental leave systems have a clear influence on the extent to which the young men in the respective countries fulfil their parental commitments and act as local agents of change in the wider social project of gender equality. We argue that while policy processes and discourses in support of young parenthood and gender equality are currently treated as disparate concerns, their articulations with one another may instead be seen as complementary and symbiotic.

Key words fatherhood • welfare system • youth • gender equity • international comparison

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Introduction

This article is the first of its kind to report on empirical findings from international comparative research about young fatherhood: young men who in policy and research terms are age 25 and under when they become a parent or experience a

pregnancy for the first time. Our empirical focus on young fathers is situated within a much longer history of social scientific interest in fathers and fatherhood that has largely overlooked them. Established around the 1980s, scholarship has progressed into a robust interdisciplinary and international field. Though uneven in different national contexts, theoretically this field was, and increasingly has been, tied to critical men's studies and ongoing discussions on masculinity, gender and power (for example, Connell, 1995; Wall and Arnold, 2007; Williams, 2008). Aligned with greater theoretical sophistication in explanations that masculinities are plural, multifaceted and in transition, family life has also been theorised as something that is done and achieved (Morgan, 2011). In research about fathers, this has resulted in elaboration of the distinctions between cultures of fatherhood and the doing of fatherhood and masculinity and their dynamics (Morgan, 2011; Andreasson and Johansson, 2016), a scholarship to which the international authorial team of this article have contributed (for example, Johansson and Andreasson, 2017; Tarrant, 2021). There is a broad consensus that fathers, in many Western countries, are becoming increasingly more emotionally and practically involved in their children's lives, as reflected in their fathering practices (Dermott, 2008). Thus, the way that fatherhood and masculinity are connected today is more about intimacy and engagement than about authority, discipline and being a breadwinner (Cabrera et al, 2018; Reinicke, 2020).

The extent to which men's caregiving has supplanted traditional commitments to breadwinning has nevertheless been the subject of ongoing scrutiny (Brannen and Nilsen, 2006; Doucet, 2020; Tarrant, 2021). For example, changes in the ways in which fatherhood and masculinities are constructed (namely, culturally normative ideas about gender) interact with structural conditions in society and are interrelated with shifting labour markets, transformations of household dynamics and the development of family politics – and how these play out in different countries (compare Plantin et al, 2003). This produces what Bailey (2015) conceptualises as a 'patriarchal deficit', in which men seek to reconcile the tensions between their roles and responsibilities as fathers, and the cultural expectations that are ascribed to them. In this vein, fatherhood (and masculinities) can be seen as looking both ways: at the intersections and interactions between society and the individual, at the institutional and the structural, and at the personal and private (Morgan, 1985).

What we see today is a defunctionalised fatherhood, where the connection between a dualistic gender role model and a functionalist perspective on fatherhood, that has traditionally positioned men as breadwinners, is deconstructed and reframed as involved and caring fatherhood. This construction of fatherhood is, of course, in part, ideological and a part of ongoing transformations of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995). However, it is also reflected in the daily lives of fathers and the doing of masculinities and fatherhood, whereby men are positioned as 'local agents of change towards gender equality' (Bjornholt, 2011). This notably individualises the responsibility for progress towards gender equality, wherein in welfare contexts, where support for shared parenting and engaged fatherhood is constrained, men appear as individually failing to fulfil the cultural prerequisites of contemporary fatherhood.

Acknowledging some of the structural and contextual features that affect the construction and experience of young fatherhood, Reinicke (2021) argues that the way in which young fatherhood is framed and enacted varies considerably among different countries, depending on the development of key support systems for young parents. Yet, despite reaching these conclusions, and given the relatively embryonic nature of

the current international evidence base about young fatherhood, few international comparative studies of young fathers in different welfare and policy contexts have the empirical evidence to convincingly make this case. Our contribution makes the first step in interrogating this argument by establishing the empirical basis for an international evidence base about young fathers.

We do so through an empirically driven examination of how young fatherhood is enacted and constructed in different national contexts and welfare systems. Representing different forms of welfare state regimes, and utilising an international comparative methodology, we analyse and compare the narratives of 10 young fathers in Sweden and 20 in the UK, respectively (n= 30 in total). We bring these data together as a case, to explore similarities and differences in how young fathers frame their experiences of being a young father. Our analysis is sociologically informed and structured in relation to the following research questions:

RQ1: How do the participants plan for and talk about the process of becoming a father?
RQ2: How do the participants describe and understand parental support provided by the welfare state in relation to fatherhood?
RQ3: In what ways (if at all) are questions of gender equality in family life and in society addressed by the participants?

Throughout, we employ the language of *engaged* rather than *involved* fatherhood (Neale and Patrick, 2016), which we suggest captures something of the commitments that men express in relation to their fatherhood regardless of their ability to do so. Some of these may not always be fulfilled or even achievable, given some of the structural constraints described. In the context of young fatherhood, this may include constrained access to the labour market, the complexity of their parenting, relationship and housing arrangements, and the insecurity of their relationships with children, as linked to the cultural determinants that position fathers as secondary to the historically embedded mother-child dyad (Neale and Patrick, 2016). We suggest that the concept of engaged fatherhood moves beyond attention to men as local agents of change, through attention to both the ideological and actual practices of fathers in context. Thus, captured alongside the intention of young fathers to 'be there', are also some of the structural and material barriers that may impinge on both their intentions and practices.

Constructing young fatherhood in Sweden and the UK

While well established as an interdisciplinary and international field, knowledge and research about fatherhood and the diversity and dynamics of fathering, is far from complete. Reviewing existing literatures, Tarrant (2021) observes that the empirical basis for research on fatherhood is predominantly that of men who are securely involved in family life as secondary carers (Doucet, 2006; Dermott, 2008), or as stay-at-home fathers (Richards Solomon, 2017). Furthermore, developments in fatherhood research have been derived largely from the experiences of adult fathers (Lau Clayton, 2016), namely when parenting occurs in age-normative circumstances. Davies and Hanna (2021) succinctly argue that young fathers have been doubly marginalised historically, both from sociocultural expectations and discourses of fatherhood, and in

research. There are myriad reasons for this marginalisation, reflective of their young age, gender and economic position. Their exclusion from and/or misrepresentation in social narratives and discourses about fatherhood, for example, has been linked to their insecure position in the labour market, which situates them on the outskirts of what can be described as the pillar of masculinity within family life (for example, Townsend, 2002). Young parenthood is also typically considered deviant from reproductive social norms in the context of a well-defined sociocultural model for when and how parenthood *should* be entered. Entering parenthood 'off time' is typically constructed as deviant, pathological and irresponsible, reinforcing the devalued status of young parenthood and the allocation of blame and derision to individual young parents, who are constructed as 'morally inferior' (Nayak and Kehily, 2014).

Reflecting the gendered character of discourses about young parenthood and family life there are also noticeable differences in how young mothers and fathers are constructed. Where young mothers have been framed as vulnerable and in need of protection (Ellis-Sloan, 2014; Wenham, 2016), fathers are more likely to be labelled absent, criminal and socially excluded (Johansson and Hammarén, 2014; Neale and Davies, 2015). Countering the problematisation of teenage and young parenthood in policy, an alternative image of young fatherhood is emerging, including narratives of young, committed, active men who are keen to engage in their parental responsibilities (Neale and Davies, 2015). In a review of selected evidence in this area, Lau Clayton (2016) nevertheless observes that despite the expression of good intentions towards 'being there' for their children, young fathers face considerable challenges and barriers to fatherhood and their participation in the family, as they navigate socioeconomic barriers.

Despite some variation in how such attitudes operate in different national and local contexts, becoming a teenage parent is rarely embraced or considered positively. It has been noted that research on young parenthood, which has predominantly been conducted in the US and the UK (Neale and Patrick, 2016), tends to focus on the 'problematic aspects' of becoming a young parent (Johansson and Hammarén, 2014; Cundy, 2016), including how young parenthood is problematised in policy and in te context of wider public health concerns (Duncan, 2010; Hadley, 2017). Being or becoming a young father blurs the lines between childhood and the responsibilities attached to adulthood and parenthood; for example, some young fathers are, by law and in policy terms, still considered children, or children having children.

Young parents themselves also identify what they consider to be the ideal time to become parents. Wissö (2019), who conducted a study on postgraduate students in Sweden, shows that students considered the ideal time for becoming a parent to be their late twenties or early thirties. Notably, in Sweden, teenage pregnancies and young parenthood have not been significantly problematised in either policy or scholarly debate, although there are some studies showing that young people of both sexes who receive child welfare services in adolescence are a high-risk group for teenage pregnancies and parenthood (Vinnerljung et al, 2007). Overall, there are low pregnancy rates in Sweden, as in the other Nordic countries. According to Ekéus (2004), the reasons for this are to be found in a strong welfare state, liberal abortion laws, and the fact that sex education has been mandatory in the curriculum since 1956, including information on contraceptive services.

Though teenage pregnancies are rare in Sweden, existing studies about young parenthood predominantly focus on mothers (Sjöberg and Bertilsdotter-Rosqvist, 2018; Wissö, 2019). Research on young Swedish fathers is rare (Pålsson et al, 2017), and has been attributed (somewhat problematically) to inherent methodological difficulties that are experienced when trying to find young fathers to participate (Pålsson et al, 2017; see also Reinicke, 2020). Including other Scandinavian countries, with similar welfare commitments to support families, Reinicke's (2021) recent study of young fathers aged between 17 and 25 in Denmark, is a notable contribution (see also Johansson and Andreasson, 2017). This study shows that the journey to young fatherhood in Denmark takes roughly two routes. For some young men, becoming a father is regarded as a positive and desirable challenge. Parenthood provides the opportunity for young men to gain control and is an important turning point in the transition to adulthood. The second route is characterised by young men who express more negative views about young parenthood. Some of these fathers felt that they had constrained choices and others felt that they must sacrifice their youth to become responsible fathers. Regardless of how fatherhood was perceived, Reinicke's (2021) research demonstrates a complex process of emotional upheaval and an expressed need for institutional support/assistance to prepare for and to manage young fatherhood (see also Reinicke, 2020).

Similar findings are also reflected in the experiences of young fathers in the UK. The qualitative longitudinal study, Following Young Fathers (Neale et al, 2015) finds that many young fathers need strong support systems and a welfare system that provides economic and other relevant social support from pregnancy onwards (Cundy, 2016), to effectively navigate their parenting journeys. However, while support with the range of relational, emotional and employment issues that young fathers might experience has a vital role to play in the UK welfare context (see also Davies and Neale, 2016), the provision, availability and accessibility of welfare is patchy and uncoordinated and represents something of a postcode lottery (Tarrant and Neale, 2017). Furthermore, lack of a cohesive policy approach to father-inclusive and gender-transformative practice and a combination of organisational, strategic and societal factors in support contexts, creates a multitude of barriers for fathers (Bateson et al, 2017). This is exacerbated by a UK policy context that also disadvantages young people. For example, young parents aged 25 and under uniformly receive a lower standard social security allowance under the Universal Credit scheme than a parent aged 25 and older (CPAG, 2020). Thus, while young men and their children may benefit from engagement with services early in their parenting journeys, wider systemic issues exacerbate the inequalities they experience. In synthesis, existing evidence in comparable countries suggests that where effective welfare systems are in place, young fathers are better supported, including financially, and are better able to fulfil their intentions to be there, with wider benefits for what we argue is a complementary policy drive towards gender equality.

Welfare systems and the ideology of gender equality

As our brief review illustrates, it is already established that the welfare systems of the UK and Sweden differ markedly, especially in terms of their relative commitments to embedding gender equality through support for families. The early work of Esping-Andersen (1990), for example, while now dated[2] and subject to criticism

(Bambra, 2004; Esping-Andersen, 2009; Hearn and Pringle, 2009), usefully identified clusters of nations that represent different political ambitions and social policies. We do not enlarge on the discussion of Esping-Andersen's model here. Rather, we note his work to elaborate on how our two selected countries represent extremes in terms of how family policies to promote fatherhood and gender equality have developed over time.

One cluster of nations, which includes Sweden, is the Nordic welfare states. These countries are characterised by a generous social security system in the public sector. Sweden's well established 'dual-earner, dual-carer family policy' (Björnberg, cited in Wissö and Bäck-Wiklund, 2021) embeds effective state support for working parents, combining extensive paid parental leave, public childcare, and paid leave for the care of sick children (Wissö and Bäck-Wiklund, 2021). Indeed, since the 1960s onwards Swedish policies have been designed to explicitly promote new fatherhood ideals, not least through the introduction of a gender-neutral parental leave system in 1974 (Andersson, 2009). In 1976, a national campaign for men's parental leave was also launched, fronted by the well-known Swedish weightlifter Lennart 'Hoa Hoa' Dahlgren, embracing an infant with his muscular arms (Johansson and Andreasson, 2017). This campaign, and others that followed, promoted the utilisation of 'daddy months': state incentives that aim to embed the gender-equal man and father, and to simultaneously question traditional discursive perceptions of men as authoritative providers (Björk, 2017). While cultural shifts around fatherhood ideals have advanced in many (other) Western countries in recent decades, Sweden and the Nordic countries are often described as pioneers in developing policies for men's involvement in childcare (Goedecke and Klinth, 2021). Currently, the paid parental leave system in Sweden is also one of the most generous in the world, consisting of 480 days of which three months are reserved for one of each parent (a 'use it or lose it' approach). Sharing the joys and challenges of transitioning to parenthood is therefore institutionalised and integrated and forms the backdrop to the experience of parenthood in Sweden. A key tenet here is that social policy is developed and implemented with the intent to redistribute resources for equality among citizens. This can manifest in diverse and not always equal ways, but caring and involved fatherhood are considered mandatory, regardless of age in Sweden.

In contrast, the UK can be said to represent a cluster of countries largely characterised by the twin ideologies of individual responsibility/freedom, and reduced government and neoliberalism. These ideologies have been used to justify cutbacks, both to welfare (which has become increasingly conditional under the auspices of austerity) and childcare. Consequently, possibilities for prolonged parental leave and paternity leave are limited in the UK, although some partial economic support is available (Levtov et al, 2015). In a detailed overview by Kaufman (2018), UK parental leave policy is described as lagging behind Europe, especially in classifications that determine the father-friendly character of policies. Despite the introduction of shared parental leave in 2015, which is ostensibly more supportive of men's involvement, this current system of paid leave has seen a low uptake among men and has been critiqued for its lack of affordability, concerns about the impacts of extended leave on men's careers, and inaccessibility to fathers who do not meet the accessibility criteria (Atkinson, 2017; Twamley and Schober, 2018).

Given that Sweden and the UK represent different welfare state models, they create fertile ground for our comparative analysis.

Following Young Fathers Further

The comparative analyses presented in this article have been developed as part of a larger qualitative longitudinal and international comparative study of the lives and support needs of young fathers, called Following Young Fathers Further (Tarrant, 2021), The international comparative work is a major strand of the study and involves generating interview data with Swedish and British young fathers to bring them into analytical conversation. Through this process we can explore the relationship between the experiences of young fathers and the two different welfare approaches and family policy contexts of each country, including similarities and differences in how they influence the parenting journeys and support needs of these young men.

In this UK-based study, a Nordic country was considered appropriate for what is an early form of comparative research about young fatherhood, because of the distinct differences in policy approaches both to young parenthood and the promotion and facilitation of gender equality. As elaborated earlier, welfare regimes in the Nordic states are markedly different from that of the UK. In the Nordic states, young fathers continue to be portrayed as a high-risk group (Johansson and Hammarén, 2014), although they do not seem to be regarded as a 'social problem' in quite the same way that they are in the UK and the US (Duncan, 2010). Like the UK, however, Nordic welfare models and institutions are not static and must adapt to tackle global challenges. Analysing these different national approaches and understandings of young fatherhood has therefore produced new insights in terms of national characteristics when it comes to masculinity configurations, gender equality, care, family life and more. The case study approach also facilitates insights concerning fatherhood and masculinity as they manifest across national boundaries and particular welfare states through variability and the principle of comparative methodology.

Access was brokered in both countries with the support of gatekeepers. In the UK, this included third sector organisations and specialist services for young fathers; in Sweden, via healthcare professionals (hosting classes for expectant parents) and open preschool services. A sample of data generated with 30 fathers was analysed (10 from Sweden, and 20 from the UK). The difference in sample size reflects that the UK team had already established relationships with young fathers through their existing longitudinal research, while the Swedish team were seeking to identify and access young fathers for the first time. The more limited problematisation of young fatherhood in Sweden also meant that these young men were less visible than those in the UK context, where in some localities, specialist support organisations have been set up for the purposes of brokering resources and information on behalf of young fathers where there are gaps in welfare state provision. Inclusion of cases for the UK sample was driven in part by the sample characteristics of the Swedish fathers and included a spread of socioeconomic circumstances and comparable age at the time of becoming a father for the first time (namely from the ages of 14 to 25 in both samples). Though the relationship between class, economy and fatherhood in Sweden have been scarcely addressed, statistics suggest that parental leave is most utilised by men with a higher education, who are well paid and cohabiting (Plantin, 2007). In this study, the socioeconomic background of the participants in both countries varied. Some were living with their own parents while finishing school; some were living with their partner and were employed. There were also job seekers who described strained financial circumstances. The participants shared an ambition for parental

involvement, though their circumstances for fulfilling this ambition varied depending on their life situation.

The interviews took place during the COVID-19 pandemic and were conducted either face-to-face or using the telephone or Zoom, depending on lockdown measures and participant preference (see also Tarrant et al, 2021). We analyse the specific impacts of the pandemic on young fathers elsewhere (see Tarrant et al, 2020a, 2020b; 2022) but we also retained questions that were pertinent to the overarching research questions guiding the study, including how young men construct gender equality and experience fatherhood. Using a semi-structured interview schedule, we asked participants about their perspectives on gender equality and the determinants of 'good' fatherhood, in their view, their fathering practices and parenting arrangements, their experience of parental leave systems in each country, and the wider relational, material and support contexts shaping their trajectories. The interviews, about one hour in length, were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Those that were conducted in Swedish were translated by a professional into English to enable the whole team to participate in the analysis.

The study received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee at the University of Lincoln, the main institutional host for the study. In the article, the names of all participants are pseudonyms and all identifiable material has been anonymised to preserve the identities and confidentiality of those who feature in the narratives. In what follows, we present integrated analyses of the young fathers' perspectives of young fatherhood, charting their journeys from planning through to their navigation of parenting, relationships and support systems.

Planning and preparedness for young fatherhood

The young fathers' levels of preparedness for parenthood varied across the samples according to personal and socioeconomic circumstances, responses to the pregnancy and availability of social, relational and welfare support. Although the ten Swedish fathers interviewed had various ways of planning and handling the process of becoming a young dad, a majority explained that they were well prepared and ready to become fathers. Like the young fathers interviewed for the UK study, they expressed a clear intention to 'be there' for their children; similarly, as Neale et al (2015) argue, while 29 of their sample of 31 fathers explained that they had unplanned pregnancies, these did not translate into unwanted children. As such, their narratives contrast with the stereotypical images of young fathers (and mothers) in precarious and disadvantaged situations that are often problematised in international policy contexts. Swedish father Charlie, for example, who has a one-year-old and is stepfather to a three-year-old, embraced the idea of becoming a young father. He and his girlfriend had already had a conversation about the possibility of being young parents and felt that it would be desirable and even fun for them:

> 'Yeah well, we talked a bit about it, that it would be fun. We mentioned it when we were together that ... we would want to be young parents, and it was well ... I think what you have to do, maybe when you meet someone and want to be dad and mum straight away then I think you have to make it clear from the start what you want.' (Charlie, age 23, cohabitant, Sweden)

Reflecting the relatively stable employment trajectories of the young fathers in the Swedish sample, when Charlie had completed his education to become a welder, he quickly secured employment. He moved from his parents' house to live with his girlfriend and thoughts about raising a family together as a couple evolved. Charlie also emphasises the importance of inter-relationally calibrating thoughts about family life early on in a relationship. Thus, in this case, when preparing for fatherhood practically and emotionally, the notion of being a young father was not understood as a problem but rather a question of ensuring that both parents were 'in on it'. Emerging, at least discursively, is a narrative of engaged and progressive young masculinity and fatherhood, in which gender equality and the joys of raising children are emphasised.

Reproductive decision making among the UK sample was typically less purposeful. Pregnancies were not the outcome of a conscious discussion in the same way as Charlie in Sweden describes. This is not to say that there were no conversations about the possibilities of parenthood. Rather, those pregnancies were either a surprise or occurred much earlier than anticipated:

> 'It was unexpected but obviously it was, like, good unexpected.' (Nathan, age 18, separated, UK)

> 'We'd spoke about it in the past and how nice it would be having kids. Obviously, it's ... and then, you know, things happening, we were like, well, we'll just go from here and we'll do the best we can.' (Bradley, age 16, in a relationship, living apart, UK)

The excerpts of the two British young fathers illustrate a certain degree of unpreparedness in relation to becoming a father at a young age, but also indicate their commitment to adapting and making the most of it. Becoming prepared for parenthood in the UK requires young parents to individually navigate and access support. This was different for the Swedish young fathers. Kevin, who is a father of a one-year-old, explains how he and his girlfriend prepared using state-supported materials:

> 'We prepared ourselves mostly through planning and stuff. There were no thoughts about having an abortion. So, it was mostly planning how one should live, how one can succeed at the same time, like watching videos about how it is to be a parent and stuff.' (Kevin, age 17, cohabitant, Sweden)

Here Kevin and his girlfriend demonstrate a commitment to establishing a parenting identity, as driven by engagement with resources that support the development of effective parenting practices. With child welfare support, the couple also had access to relevant informative brochures and video material from the early weeks of pregnancy.

Both Kevin and his girlfriend were living at home, as children, with their parents when she became pregnant, so they decided to find an apartment of their own. Whereas Kevin's parents were supportive of this idea, his girlfriend's parents were not. Furthermore, her parents planned to move as well, and they wanted to take their daughter with them. After some prolonged discussion, the young couple moved into their own apartment, though this meant that they partly lost the possibility of daily support (emotional, practical, and so on) of the girlfriend's parents, as they moved to another city. While

Kevin and his partner were able to make this decision despite the withdrawal of support from the maternal grandparents, this is not always so easy in the UK housing market, where the housing crisis means that many young people still live with their parents well into their twenties (Neale and Ladlow, 2015). In the UK, maternal gatekeeping (Neale and Lau Clayton, 2014) like that identified in Kevin's case, becomes more of barrier to engaged fatherhood for young fathers, especially where grandmothers may be extensively involved in caregiving and in decision making about responsibilities.

Indeed, in general, the young fathers in the UK experienced a much broader lack of support when preparing for parenthood. Where Kevin described the withdrawal of family support from the maternal grandparents, they were still able to secure housing and learn about parenthood via state-provided videos. Here, Martin describes how little support there is from the outset for fathers in the UK:

> '… like, girls, mothers and that, they get help with midwives and stuff, like dads don't get any preparation for this, they've just gotta do it when the baby's here and it's difficult. And then for me, when I first gotta, like, change [baby's] nappy and that, there was way too much pressure on us. I didn't have a bloody clue what I was doing and there was somebody watching us with a notebook, like, 'cause you know how we were both young, just to make sure that we can look after the baby. It's way too much pressure when you don't know what you're doing, and that's when [support service] started and that, we started doing, like, little courses … how to do baby stuff. How to feed them properly, how to burp them properly, change them properly. 'Cause I didn't even know, on nappies, there's like lines on them where you're meant to put the straps, I just, I didn't even know that.' (Martin, age 22, separated, UK)

The support service Martin refers to is a charity that specifically supports young fathers as a disadvantaged and often overlooked group. His narrative illustrates the vital role of services in promoting positive parenting practices, as well as gender equality in parenting. Unfortunately, as noted, these services are not always accessible, meaning that many young fathers lack support throughout their parenting journeys and fall through the gaps created by an inadequate welfare system. In the worst-case scenarios, the disadvantages young fathers experience result in reduced access to children or a complete loss of parental responsibility (Neale et al, 2015).

The integration of our findings here highlights similarities and differences in young fathers' transitions and preparedness to parenthood in the two countries. Though there is a variability in the narratives presented in both the Swedish and UK contexts, both sets of young men demonstrated their commitments towards embracing their changing identity and trying to make things work, even where practical, financial and relational issues might be present. Perhaps, suggestive of a broader generational shift among young men, these young fathers embrace and embody the cultural ideal of parental involvement and gender equity, though this is differently supported depending on which welfare context the individual finds himself (compare Sjöberg and Bertilsdotter-Rosqvist, 2018)

Parental leave systems in Sweden and the UK

Our analyses also demonstrate that access to parental leave is paramount in supporting young fathers to fulfil their intentions to 'be there' for their children and partners.

In Sweden, parental insurance is divided into different parts. First there is a paternity (like maternity) leave, in which fathers are granted two weeks' paid leave to be present during childbirth and take care of the new-born. In addition to this, there is also parental leave, long-term leave that is available to either or both parents, consisting of a total of 480 days. Three months of these are reserved for one parent (most often used by the father) and cannot be transferred to the other parent. During parental leave the parent receives roughly 80 per cent of his/her ordinary income. If they do not have an income, the monthly allowance is set to 7,500 SEK (approximately 750€). The aim of this is, among other things, to establish and facilitate caring and present fathers, particularly in the early years of their children's lives. This does not mean that there is a total correspondence between the discourse of gender equality at the sociocultural and welfare state levels, and the lived experience and enactment of these ideas (Johansson and Andreasson, 2017). Nevertheless, this is a system that all parents must navigate, requiring decision making pertaining to parental roles and identities.

In a discussion between Swedish young father Johan and his partner, they considered how they might share their parental insurance days and split the time at home with the children. Their personal circumstances, however, resulted in them coming up with another plan:

> 'We spoke first about that we were going to have half and half. Because it was like that, we wanted it to be equal. But then we went through it, and I said like "yeah, well" ... as it looks like right now then it's me that has a job, she doesn't have a job otherwise. [...] We have the plan that she's going to be on maternity leave for a year, so it'll be until the winter again then, and then she's going to study. And then you have these ... there's three months there that come after, that the dad can take. And if I don't take them then no one can take them, so that's just money that gets thrown away. So, we have the plan that I'm going to try and take those three months, after one year. As it looks right now ... Then things can ... she might get a really good job or something, you never know, it might change.' (Johan, age 20, cohabitant, Sweden)

Although the intentions to construct a gender-equal and shared parenting family are apparent in the narratives of the young men in Sweden, practical, economic and sociocultural circumstances still affect these decisions and plans. The initial intention to share half-half therefore, is here transformed to a more common and convenient pattern of using the three quoted months. To some extent, the policy could therefore be seen as relatively successful in its aims of promoting the idea of gender-equal practices among couples, including young parents, but due to practical circumstances this ideal is also negotiated in relation to everyday practicalities.

In the UK, employed fathers are typically entitled to two weeks of paid paternity leave. However, this is not available to agency or zero-hours contract workers, or to those who are self-employed or in education. This effectively means that many young fathers are not entitled to any paternity leave nor parental leave if they are still in education and/or do not have a stable job (MAG, 2021). The young fathers in the UK suggested that paternity leave was only available to them at the discretion of sympathetic employers or was not long enough:

> '… when my youngest was born, that's what I did, I took two weeks' paid leave and my boss luckily let me take an extra week holiday as well.' (Trevor, age 23, separated, UK)

> 'I think they need longer, because I think obviously, it's such a crucial part, is the first parts of a child's life. I think dads need to be involved, just as mums. They need to be supporting the mums as much as possible and being there for the kid. I just don't think two weeks is enough at all. I think it's crucial that they spend more time with the newborn, as much as mums do.' (Jock, age 22 at the time of conception, separated, UK)

In both sets of cases, the young fathers were aware of the cultural determinants of engaged fatherhood and gender equality and expressed this as desirable. As Jock suggests, this would allow him to support both his child and partner at a crucial time. Overall, however, these intentions were better enabled and supported by the Swedish parental leave system. In the UK, there is a risk that those who already have precarious and insecure employment are excluded from engaged fatherhood at the time when their engagement is perhaps the most critical. Current parental leave systems in the UK therefore work against opportunities to embed shared parenting and gender-equal practices among young parents and further stigmatise them through their exclusion from both the labour market and family support.

Gender equality as discourse and in practice

As the previous section indicates, in Sweden, and less so in the UK, the notion of gender equality is supported by the state and ingrained into the fabric of everyday life through the institutionalisation of parental leave and supportive childcare systems (Johansson and Andreasson, 2017). As both sets of data exemplify, the ways that young fathers talk about family life are also, to a varied extent, coloured by the idea of gender equality and of sharing responsibilities for children and the home. Swedish participant, Jesper, describes the explicit way that he and his wife talk about these issues:

> 'My wife is … yeah, she's a feminist and I'm also a feminist, really. It's a hard word to say these days because – or it's hard to say, whatever opinion, because the internet has ruined all types of opinions. But equality is something we work a lot on, so that, for example, like all housework, not all, but the majority I do. I clean and I wash up in order to help out in that way. And we talk a lot about how we're going to do things, and how – yeah, we try to have a very clear dialogue and idea of what it is we're thinking.' (Jesper, age 25, cohabitating, Sweden)

Jesper notably self-identifies as a feminist and these discussions are key to the interpersonal dynamics and parenting practices of him and his wife. A broader commitment to gender equality and engaged fatherhood was also significant among the UK young fathers and was considered universal, although the ability to fulfil it and remain committed to it was both circumstantial and individualised. Like Jesper, UK-based Craig explains that he also participates in domestic labour, a private form

of engaged fathering that is largely invisible, especially among low-income and marginalised fathers (for example, Gillies, 2009):

> 'Because [partner's] gone back to work recently so I've sorta like taken more on board so yeah ... So I'm just happy that I can actually be here and watch my kids grow up ... . It does make me feel down from time to time when I sit there and think about it because I'm used to working meself, it's all I've done. But when I sit there sometimes and think about it, it's just like I need to go and get a job, I need a job and it does make me feel down sometimes.' (Craig, age 19 at age of first conception, cohabitant, UK)

Though most of the Swedish fathers interviewed describe a rather smooth transition into fatherhood, there are also those whose experiences were more problematic. Nicklas, for example, is a non-resident father. He separated from his girlfriend when his daughter was one year old. They decided that their daughter should live with her mother, and that he could meet her at weekends. His ex-girlfriend and daughter live almost a two-hour drive away, making it difficult for Nicklas to maintain regular contact with his daughter. Here, he expresses a distinct desire for more regular involvement in his daughter's life but assumes that it is not going to be possible:

> 'The goal, the dream, would be that I have my daughter all the time. But ... that's not going to ... presumably not going to happen, but if I was to think realistically it would be that I move a bit closer or that they move a bit closer to me. And that I have my daughter every other week.' (Nicklas, 24 years old, separated and living in a new relationship, Sweden)

For non-resident fathers, both in Sweden and the UK, distance and non-residence are significant barriers to achieving the desired practices of equal shared care. Trevor, in the UK, feels his involvement in his daughter's life could be improved if he had a car:

> 'Yeah, I feel, with my eldest, very involved. Like, I go to school meetings, parents' evening, stuff like that, I see her every weekend. Me and her mum are communicating fine. Yeah, I feel as involved as I can be. I think it could be more, but the only reason it could be more is things like having a car and the fact of the transportation, and then I'd probably stop off on my way home from work some days or something like that.' (Trevor, 23 years old, separated, UK)

Because Trevor works full time and does not live close to his daughter's school, he is unable to have her stay at his house during the week. The ideological goal of shared parenting and gender equality is apparent in these narratives and largely pursued among the young fathers interviewed. Such ideals are, however, often negotiated in relation to daily practicalities: work, financial situations, and more. A father's non-resident status is especially consequential. In these cases, the mother-child dyad is notably privileged to overcome the practical barriers imposed by distance, while fathers are required to prioritise employment.

Comparative reflections and conclusions

Aiming to investigate and compare how young fatherhood is enacted and constructed against the backdrop of different national contexts and welfare systems, this article presents comparative analyses of how young fathers in Sweden and the UK experience and perceive fatherhood. Revealed are striking similarities and differences in young fathers' experiences and constructions, both of engaged fatherhood and their broader commitments to gender equality, as expressed through discussions of their relationships and their intentions to engage in shared parenting. While young and teenage parenthood are evidently problematised more in the UK than in Sweden, both in policy and by young fathers themselves, all of the fathers who participated in the research and in both contexts expressed a desire to 'be there' as parents, reflecting a promising generational shift to engaged fatherhood among these young men.

However, our evidence suggests that this is better sustained among young parents when family support systems engage both parents from the outset of their parenting journeys. In the UK, there is a greater reliance on the third sector and localised support services to guide young, often disadvantaged men, through a difficult parenting support landscape that is predominantly mother-centric and presents barriers for fathers as parents. In contrast, while Swedish fathers must still negotiate the particularities of their parenting, familial, relationship and employment circumstances, there is evidence of an implicit trust that the existing welfare and support system will help and guide them: notably, for example, in the form of prolonged paid parental leave, accessible housing opportunities, secure employment during parental leave and government-supported parental education, offered to all parents in Sweden. In combination, these structural prerequisites serve to support the young men's ambitions to pursue engaged fatherhood and gender equality within family life.

Theoretically, our findings also enabled us to interrogate how attitudes, practices and policies regarding fatherhood and gender equality are entangled and intersect with discourses about young parenthood. Gender ideals and visions of engaged fatherhood are constantly negotiated in and through daily practices, and in the context of family and welfare support systems. Although the cultural ideal of the engaged father prevails among young people in both Sweden and the UK, our analyses indicate that father involvement and engagement is better facilitated in the context of supportive measures, in the form of constructive social policy initiatives and socioeconomic changes. There is compelling evidence here that the problematisation of young parenthood, as it is in the UK, is antithetical to progress towards gender equality. Instead, investments in generous and early support for parents are likely to be more effective in symbiotically facilitating gender equality, engaged fatherhood and independence among young men who become parents when they are young. Confirming previous research, our findings further emphasise the significance of flexible and well-established support systems for young fathers, which might otherwise hold a marginalised position, financially and in the labour market. Based on these findings, we advocate for additional international empirical research that examines the relationship between young fatherhood and different cultural and welfare models, and the changing landscapes of young fatherhood and masculinities.

Notes

[1] Corresponding author.

[2] We acknowledge, for example, that Sweden can no longer straightforwardly be defined as a social democratic welfare regime, given the effect and influence of neoliberal policies.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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