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Abstract

The article analyses public parental leave in eight northern European countries, and assesses its opportunity potential to facilitate equal parental involvement and employment, focusing on gender and income opportunity gaps. It draws on Sen's *capability approach* and Weber's *ideal-types* to comparative policy analysis, and offers the ideal parental leave architecture, one which minimizes the policy-generated gender and class inequality in parents' opportunities to share parenting and keep their jobs, thus providing real opportunities for different groups of individuals to achieve valued functionings when they are parents. Five new policy indicators are created to assess leave against the ideal architecture, employing benchmarking and graphical analyses to analyse countries' public policies from 2015. The method considers two sources of opportunity inequality: the leave system (as the opportunity and constraint structure) and the socio-economic and cultural contexts (as the conversion factors). It produces a nuanced and comprehensive overview of national leave policies, visually representing policy across countries. It challenges a policy-cluster idea and demonstrates that public leave policies in northern Europe are far from homogenous; they diverge not only in the degree to which they create real opportunities for parents across gender and income groups but also in the policy dimensions through which these opportunities are created. These findings suggest that family policies do not fit neatly the established welfare state types or the Nordic-Baltic divide, and that considering policy capability ramifications beyond gender warrants further research.

Key words: family policy, gender and class, capability, comparative analysis, policy indicators, Nordic and Baltic

Introduction

Comparative welfare state research continues to describe the Baltic states according to their specific historical and geopolitical context, largely lumping them into a geopolitically convenient, homogenous 'Eastern European' cluster. Two comprehensive studies of family policy in 'Eastern Europe' (Szelewa & Polakowski 2008; Javornik 2014) reveal significant intra-group variation, with the Baltic states not only representing different policy models, but following different trajectories after the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, despite their geographical proximity and shared reputation for high female employment, their family policies have not been systematically compared with those in an established cluster of the Nordic welfare state regime. Few earlier studies that also include this group report contradictory findings, either separating the Nordics from the Baltics (Ciccia and Bleijenbergh 2014) or grouping Estonia into the Nordic cluster but not Latvia (Lohman and Zagel 2015). Interestingly, however, the Nordic states but also Lithuania and Estonia are considered to have the best parental leave policies in the world (Weller 2016). All this challenges single policy cluster idea and invites further research into policy design, particularly because the Baltic group received comparatively little attention during the initial years of considerable focus on the post-socialist transition, and little remains known about their more recent policy developments.

Family policies, of which parental leave is the most salient feature, are in a state of flux across Europe. In some countries austerity measures have stalled progress in legislation and practice, others have extended their rights, especially to fathers. Different ways in which interventions have been made provide a constellation of significant interest for gender equality developments (Saxonberg 2013). With family policies being central to the current transformations of the welfare states, policy programming around *parental leave* (used hereafter as an umbrella term for all types of insurance-based childcare-related leave rights)¹ is emblematic of interventions that cut across domains such as employment, family, children and childcare, gender and living standards. Against

this background the paper analyses this policy instrument across eight northern European countries, to examine how it shapes individual's real opportunities to 'be and do' around the family's first critical turning point - the arrival of a child.

Earlier comparative studies of leave policies do not comprehensively accommodate how different elements of the socio-economic and cultural contexts impact the way legal entitlements shape parents' real opportunities to use leave; they also prevalingly assume equal impact of national provisions across the population. Few include this interrelationship, highlighting parental orthodoxies, working cultures and economic constraints as key barriers to parents sharing parenting obligations (e.g. Hobson *et al.* 2011; Saxonberg 2013; Author). However, the focus on inequalities in opportunities has rendered largely invisible from dominant work-family debates the types of opportunity imbalances that are likely to impact parents differently, e.g. financial costs being the key concern for low-income parents viz-a-viz opportunity costs for top income earners (but Hobson *et al.* 2011, 2013; Warren 2015). Previous studies of this interlink largely focus on instruments other than parental leave, prevalingly assuming equal impact of national contexts across different socio-economic groups. All these considerations have capability ramifications, and if comparative work-family policy analysis is to better represent class inequalities, then this should be more fully conceptualized, an issue this paper seeks to address. This opens up both the conceptual and analytical space for comparative analysis to consider the often neglected issue of gendered access to policy instruments across income groups, and parental leave represents a particularly fruitful area for methodological and conceptual reflections in comparative family policy analysis.

Methodological innovation we propose is that of conceptualising parental leave as a real opportunity structure for people to achieve valued functionings (beings and doings after a child is born), focusing on gender (as proposed by Cicia and Verloo 2012; Saxonberg 2013; Author) and

income inequalities (as proposed by Warren 2015). We focus on leave as a specific instrument of work-family policy, whose design, embedded in socio-cultural and economic contexts, expresses multiple interpretations of gendered and class parenting opportunities. To analyse the role of public policy in shaping gender and class (in)equality in real opportunities to achieve work-family fit, we merge Javornik's (2014) comparative methodology based on Weber's ideal-type approach with Author (forthcoming) adoption of Sen's (1985; 1999) capability approach to comparative family policy research. This combination allows us to develop ideal-type leave architecture that reduces policy-related sources of gendered and classed inequalities in opportunities. Against this background we conceptualize real opportunities as three interconnected 'valued functionings' (Sen 1999) we deem valuable for mothers, fathers and the child – i.e. the opportunity to stay in the labour market while having a child; to care personally for a child; and to be cared for by both parents. We offer a conceptual model to explore how leave affects "interpersonal variations" (Sen 1989; 1993) of agency (the mother and the father), creating and constraining possibility to make genuine choice to use and share leave to achieve these valued functionings. Using this framework we compare leave systems in the Nordic and Baltic country groups. Our analysis demonstrates that national leave entitlements present material opportunities (resources) that shape the boundaries of what is possible for parents and the child, and pave the way towards policy uptake. But multiple pressures and hurdles inevitably embedded in socio-economic contexts dictate parents' real opportunity to claim statutory entitlements and thus to make genuine choices about their parenting practices around childbirth.

The paper continues with a theoretical discussion to set the conceptual framework of the analysis. To identify and understand connections between policy and capabilities across social groups, the next section presents national policy designs. The paper concludes by critically reflecting and offering possible directions for future comparative policy analysis.

Theorizing parental leave as real opportunity structure across gender and income lines

The birth of a child represents a turning point in any family's life. This change most significantly affects women because childbearing years correspond with the years of their core economic activity (when wages and skills should continue to grow). Moreover, care has long been a “woman-specific concept” (Daly and Lewis 2000, p. 283) and motherhood remains one of the main determinants of women's lower activity in the labour force, restricting access to adequate income over the life course and into retirement. For men the reverse is true: whilst the employment rates and the number of hours in work generally increase for fathers, their access to time off from work to take care of a child is more limited. That notwithstanding, more men seek to achieve a better work-family fit, even if it means a loss in pay (e.g. Fahlén 2014).

Comparative welfare state research highlights that the welfare states differ in the extent to which they consider parents' uneven capability to invest in paid employment and the family (e.g. Korpi 2000; Leitner 2003; Saraceno and Keck 2011). According to Wilson (1977, p. 9) the welfare state is “not just a set of services; it is also a set of ideas about society, about the family, and – not least importantly, about women who have a centrally important role within the family, as its linchpin”. Every state chooses its own combination of policy instruments, i.e. the services, the money to purchase services and/or familial care (Korpi 2000). These choices represent the framework within which companies and individuals operate, making it easier/harder to be a ‘working mother’ and ‘active father’ in some countries than others. As Orloff (1993, p. 303-4) explains it, “... the character of public social provision affects women's material situations, shapes gender relationships, structures political conflict and participation, and contributes to the formation and mobilization of specific identities and interests.”

The post-2008 welfare states increasingly assume that men and women equally need to earn for their own social security. Nevertheless, they neither assume equal obligations to care nor the child's

opportunity to be cared for by both parents. Of the various work-family policy provisions available cross-nationally parental leave facilitates familial care for the youngest while allowing parents to keep their job. However, its design differently constrains parents' real opportunities, either by exacerbating or reducing gender and income inequalities (e.g. Gornick and Meyers 2003; Ferrarini 2006; Misra *et al.* 2010). We argue that these not only critically frame the conditions under which women can access and engage with the job market over their lives but also men's access to parenting over the family's lifecycle (also Leitner 2003; Mandel and Semyonov 2005). Basically, public policy on parental leave sets 'the rules of the game' (North 1990), by endorsing, legitimizing and re-producing 'ethos' of social norms and parenthood practices (Hobson *et al.* 2011: 173). Thereby it creates opportunities for parents to make claims at various institutional settings, affecting their capabilities to achieve work-family fit (Hobson *et al.* 2011). This provides a theoretical perspective on how the welfare state as a legislator and benefit- and service supplier can use public policy (parental leave) to challenge or reinforce gender roles, differently framing parents' and child's capabilities.

Maternity leave (or quota) and paternity leave (or quota) are by default gender-specific—with key distinction in opportunity because fathers are often not offered the same period of leave as women nor is paternity leave stipulated by international conventions. Moreover, for employees, leave is delivered at the company level, where power and negotiations among employees and employers shape the practice (Bardach 1977). Limited resources, but also competing interpretations, organisational culture and unconscious gender bias (Benschop and Verloo 2011) all shape parents' access to public policy instruments (Skinner 2005). That is, organizational practice may make parents reluctant to claim the entitlements (e.g. Starrels 2009), particularly when this could result in job loss or discriminatory treatment. Furthermore, parental orthodoxies², i.e. normative expectations of what proper parenting entails, could make parents, particularly fathers, reluctant to participate in policy programmes, thereby limiting child's opportunity to be with both parents.

Against this background we argue that individual and non-transferable entitlements are key to real opportunities for mothers and especially fathers, providing normative guidelines for ‘proper’ fatherhood, sense of entitlement and opportunities for making claims at the workplace.

Miller and Ridge (2013), focusing on single mothers in the UK, argue that accessing statutory entitlements is more challenging for low income parents. Their financial hardship and fears over income loss are crucial for understanding working-class everyday lives (Warren 2015). Thus, income support benefit is the leave’s salient feature, particularly because the contemporary reality to the work-life has been that of deepening economic inequalities. The replacement levels are not only crucial for class, but also for gender. The neoclassical economic theory and the human capital thesis help us to conceptualize this dynamic. The former argues that labour supply is a (rational) consumption choice between one’s market income and time spent outside paid work (e.g. Becker 1965, 1981). Using the ‘time allocation model’ Becker explains that women supply labour as long as their additional earning purchases more goods and services than required to make up for the lost home production and leisure.³ Thus, when leave is poorly compensated, the magnitude of the household income shock is higher; this is particularly relevant in countries with lower levels of economic development, where financial concerns have been more pronounced (e.g. Grönlund and Javornik 2014). That notwithstanding, the income shock is lower when used by women because of the gender pay gaps (Plantenga and Remery 2005: 48). This means that, in practice, “insufficient parental benefit is a structural incentive for female childcare at home” (Leitner 2003: 372).

The human capital thesis, using the ‘opportunity-cost effect’ (e.g. Del Boca *et al.* 2008), however argues that rational economic actors use human capital stock as profitably as possible: as one’s education increases, the opportunity costs of staying out of paid employment grow and equal the prevailing wage for individuals with the same educational level, experiences and skills (Mammen and Paxson 2000: 142-145). Considering the educational homogamy among couples, parents with

higher income have more opportunities to take leave, relative to those constrained by household income need (e.g. Steiber and Haas 2009: 646). However, their opportunity costs from staying out of the job market are higher, regardless of the benefit rate (Görllich and de Grip 2009). With reference to this thesis a rise in benefits levels shifts the cost-benefit relationship (Kangas and Rostgaard 2007: 248) for both women and men across income groups (Fagan and Hebson 2005: 8). Then again, leave could exacerbate gender and class inequalities when benefit caps are imposed: a limit on the total amount of benefit that people can get reduces the effective replacement rate, in particular among higher income groups, causing a household income shock. In fact, most European countries have the benefits capped, with Denmark being one of the most prominent cases: their benefit cap level equals to approx. 50 per cent of the average wage, meaning that the majority of eligible parents are provided with less than 100 per cent of formal replacement rate (Kosłowski *et al.* 2016).⁴ Benefit caps inevitably reduce effective replacement rates, creating opportunity gaps between mothers and fathers across income groups.

The opportunity gaps embedded in public policy, which frame individual actions, have not been systematically conceptualized in comparative family policy analysis. As Hobson *et al.* (2011) highlight, there is a need for an agency-centred analytical framework that allows us to understand how individuals' use of policy is formed by structural opportunities and constraints, but also opportunities within the policy that privileges some and marginalizes others. To contribute new perspectives to comparative family policy research, we offer a new method of evidencing the realisation of entitlements for parents across countries as discussed below.

Analytical framework for comparative analysis of parental leave

All European countries have parental leave policies in place, yet we know little about the mechanisms underlying their use. Gendered and classed opportunities embedded in public policy are of particular interest to this article, as we conceptualize the links between policy design and

inequalities in parents' real opportunity. To explore these in a country-comparative perspective, we merge the capability approach (hereafter referred to as CA) with Weber's ideal types analysis; this innovative application allows us to make explicit the national policy design by revealing the underlying gendered and classed opportunities and constraints embedded in national policy on parental leave.

CA as a theoretical perspective was originally proposed for conceptualising and measuring well-being and human development (Sen 1985; 1999). It is pertinent to our analysis because it facilitates theoretical conceptualization of parental leave policy in terms of real opportunity available to people to achieve valued functionings such as the opportunity to stay in the labour market while having a child; to care personally for a child; and a child's opportunity to be cared for by both parents (shown in figure 1). Furthermore, it allows us to define the (dis)advantageous effects of particular leave policy system across populations, as embedded in the socio-economic and cultural contexts. Two of CA notions are key to our analysis: that of (1) 'functionings' and (2) 'capabilities'. In this concept, functioning is any being or doing, whereby we focus on 'valued functioning' as those beings and doings intrinsically valuable to people (Sen 1999). Capabilities, then, are the valued functionings that one is able to achieve. That is, caring for a child while working is a valued functioning, and the real opportunity to stay at home to care for a child *and* to keep a job is the corresponding capability.

Drawing on CA, people may have access to the same formal policy means (i.e. statutory entitlements). But whether they have the same real opportunity to use those to achieve valued functioning depends on the 'conversion factors' (figure 1). For example, fathers could have similar legal rights (*formal* opportunities) to parental leave and pay as mothers. That notwithstanding, fathers' *real* opportunities to use leave may be affected *inter alia* by economic constraints and/or parental orthodoxies that cast mothers as proper carers. Thus the same legal right may be converted

into different *real* opportunities because of the socio-economic and cultural contexts (conversion factors). This is pertinent to evidence-based policy-making where any omission of socio-economic and cultural contexts could be misleading (Saxonberg and Szelewa 2007; Author).

Another key distinction is that of ‘observed functionings’ (Robeyns 2005). These are what we observe people do or are – in standard family policy analysis this translates into variables such as leave uptake; this captures the use of policy, which may result from either the *real* opportunities that parents have or from their own choice. CA allows us to distinguish between these two. For example, using CA we could explain fathers’ lower leave uptake by (a) their individual choice not to use it; or (b) the opportunity and constraint structures framing their choice – e.g. albeit fathers may have the same legal entitlement to parental leave as mothers, they may not have a real opportunity to exercise it because of the social norms casting mothers as ‘proper’ carers and/or normative expectations of how a proper male-employee behaves (e.g. Pfau-Effinger 2012). To assess whether policy provides parents with real opportunities to care while working, both sources of inequalities (i.e. those stemming from difference in the legal entitlements and those from the ‘conversion factors’) should be considered (Author).

In previous studies, single/composite indicator has often been used as an uncontested variable to measure family policy across countries (Lyness *et al.* 2012). These have been subject of much academic controversy (e.g. Fagan and Hebson 2005; Gilbert 2008; Javornik 2014). We subscribe to this critique because such indicators are less adequate predictors of multifaced capabilities (real opportunities).

Against this background we need to first determine the features of parental leave that are associated with an advantageous real opportunity effect across genders and class lines. In the absence of clear criteria for distinguishing more/less valuable functionings in relation to parental leave, we draw on

Hobson's application of CA to work-life research, which identifies work-family balance as a valued functioning (2014: 6-7). However, her conceptualization of valued functioning is less adequate for our purpose because it draws on outcome indicators (of observed functionings) to reflect the capabilities, and conflates means with conversion factors.⁵ Thus, we refine the valued functionings as three interconnected opportunities: to stay in the labour market while having a child; to care personally for a child; and to be cared for by both parents. We conceptualize leave as a 'policy-driven means', which, embedded in the socio-economic and cultural context, represents a real opportunity structure for people to achieve valued beings and doings. This allows us to distinguish between gender and class inequalities in real opportunities among parents that can result from (a) the salient features of parental leave (means); or (b) the 'conversion factors', i.e. parental orthodoxies, work cultures and economic constraints that may impact the translation of means (figure 1). Another key distinction is that, in our analysis, these relate to three parties involved: the mother, the father *and* the child, who has been often overlooked in comparative family policy research (Author).

[Figure 1. Theoretical framework]

Ideal parental leave

As discussed above, policies are different from how they are used in practice and socio-economic context matters even when we have the ideal policy (Author). There is no simple formula to determine the ideal parental leave architecture, more so as the efforts made by governments to support families are multi-dimensional (Misra *et al.* 2010). However, analysing policy on parental leave as the opportunity structure for parents, the ideal public policy would treat all people equally, providing *real* opportunity for equal parental involvement in the raising of children across gender and income lines.⁶ In this respect, the conception of equality is shaped by a commitment to the *social value* of parenthood (Javornik and Oliver 2015).

Against this background we assess whether, and how national leave system creates inequalities in real opportunities to achieve valued functionings, considering gender and class (the latter operationalized as income inequality) in diverse socio-economic and cultural contexts. However, focusing on traditional policy indicators may conceal leave effect and any trade-offs in real opportunity. To take up this challenge, we draw on the method offered by Javornik (2014) using a set of organising principles that guide comparative leave analysis. Her *ideal-types* approach assesses and compares parental leave policy against a set of standards across countries, focusing on women's opportunities to stay in the labour market and fathers' to care for the child. It thus fits particularly well to our study. But as our analytical focus and aim diverge, we modify her approach and develop new criteria to assess policies in our sample countries as below.

Policy components and assessment criteria

Following Javornik's (2014) indicator development we construct five indicators as leave's salient features of equality, embedded in the socio-economic context; these distinguish between and assess efforts made by governments to support equal parental involvement in childcare across gender and income lines (shown in table 1). Data is sourced from the International Network on Leave Policies and Research (Kosłowski *et al.* 2016); OECD.Stat and OECD Family Database (2016) and Eurostat, and refers to 2015, unless otherwise specified.

First, **the equality of treatment** (Indicator 1) assesses whether policy enables equal access to paid time off. We argue that maintaining enhanced entitlements for mothers without mandating equivalent benefits for fathers creates a disincentive for couples to share parental leave. We measure this as the ratio of the full-rate equivalent (FRE)⁷ of an individual and non-transferable leave for mothers to the FRE of an individual and non-transferable leave for fathers. We acknowledge the uniqueness of pregnancy (i.e. mothers need leave also for medical reasons); even the EU law allows for a derogation from the principle of equal treatment, allowing women to be

treated more favourably than men in connection to pregnancy or childbirth (Javornik and Oliver 2015). Thus we use the difference approach and accommodate the gap between policy ambition and the perpetuation of gender bias in legal framework to some extent.

Second, the **fathers' access to financially sustainable⁸ leave** (Indicator 2) assesses the absolute length of a financially viable, non-transferable leave for fathers. Financial viability is particularly relevant for fathers whose use of leave is significantly influenced by the benefit levels – i.e. they are more sensitive to income loss (Bruning and Plantenga, 1999: 196; Fagan and Hebson, 2005: 95). Thus, the replacement rate determines whether they would take leave at all; ideally, policy recognizes the social value of fatherhood and replaces previous earnings at 100 per cent. However, the household income shock, caused by the income replacement rate, depends on the living standards in the country, i.e. lower replacement rates may be financially more viable in wealthier societies and vice versa. Therefore, we adjust the crude income replacement rate by country's GDP index (per capita in PPS; EU28=100; Eurostat). We set the threshold at 70⁹ per cent of ARR as a cut-off point for a financially viable leave. When the country provides a financially viable leave, we calculate the length of financially viable leave for each country (else, country is assigned the lowest score as shown in table 1). The ideal length of leave reflects the EU guideline to a minimum of 14-week maternity leave (Directive 92/85/EEC); applying the gender-equality principle we consider the ideal to be at least 3 months for fathers.

Countries may also provide familial or transferable entitlements, and the income-replacement rate determines who takes leave. Thus, the **financial viability of transferable (family/joint) leave** (Indicator 3) estimates who is more likely to take this leave. But, by contrast to Indicator 2, sharing the family right is sensitive to gender pay gaps: we assume that the household income shock is lower when leave is used by women because of their lower income. Thus, to create real opportunities for shared parenting, the transferable benefit should be close to 100 per cent of ARR.

We adjust this for the gender pay gap (GPG) by multiplying the ratio of women's average earnings to men's average earnings (i.e. 100-GPG) by ARR¹⁰ (data refers to 2014; Eurostat 2016).

Fourth, **equality in effective income replacement rate** (Indicator 4) assesses the effective income-replacement rate, i.e. the effect of a benefit cap on the financial viability of leave. Most systems operate with a benefit ceiling, which means the effective replacement rate of income coverage by public benefit is lower, in particular for parents whose income exceeds the set amount. This disrupts equality across income groups but also gender (gender pay gaps). Thus, ideally, leave benefit would have no ceiling, or, alternatively, the cap would be set so high that the majority of employees would not be affected (at two times the average wage). To estimate effective income-replacement rate, we calculate the ratio of the benefit cap to the average wage in the country (data refers to 2015; OECD 2016): the lower the ratio the higher the inequality.

And finally, the **congruency of leave and public childcare** (Indicator 5) assesses whether policy provides real opportunities for mothers to resume employment after the end of paid leave. Here, we apply Javornik's (2014) criteria to measure the gap between paid leave and childcare. In an ideal scenario, public childcare becomes available before the earnings-related leave ends. Another scenario is close to ideal, i.e. when earnings-related leave and services are contiguous. Alternatively, any gap between these disrupts real opportunities for parents, but particularly mothers to resume employment. By providing a place in day care without delay, the state also sends a message about proper parenthood (i.e. acceptability of public childcare; Gornick and Meyers, 2003: 197-206).

Benchmarking with scoring

Because not all of the selected policy components are quantifiable indicators, we translate them into measurable variables applying the scoring method proposed by Javornik (2014). This is employed to assess the conformity of each component to an ideal policy (real opportunity). Specific

‘standards’ are used, allocating a score using an 8-point scale, based on the components’ real opportunity potential: the higher the score, the higher the potential. Each policy component is scored repeatedly across countries using a scale with a four-value set of 1-2-4-8 (table 1):

- 8 indicates that the component is close to the ideal architecture (real opportunity)
- 4 that it is moderately close
- 2 that it is far from ideal, and
- 1 that the component is the furthest from the ideal.

8 is a maximum because 10 or 100 (as used in other studies) have too strong an influence on the results, and 1 a minimum because of the multiplicative method used for calculating the composite index.¹¹ In our case, however, the individual scores are the main results albeit the scoring method allows for a composite index to be calculated (for full details see Javornik 2014, p. 249).

[Table 1. Policy dimensions, assessment criteria, scores]

Graphical analysis

Finally, we graphically analyse leave system against an ideal provision, using Javornik’s (2014) graphical representations (radar charts). The advantage of this method is that policies can be easily read from the charts, reflecting the opportunity potential. Each chart represents one country and comprises of 5 equiangular spokes, one for each component. Their length, proportional to the score, ranges between 1 and 8: the higher the score the higher the opportunity potential. The line connecting them into a radial figure gives policy a spider web appearance: the larger the area the closer to the ideal. Opportunity potential of each policy components can be read from the chart, clockwise: the top spoke illustrates equality of access to paid time off; followed by the opportunity for fathers to use leave; gender equality of leave (i.e. child’s opportunity to be with both parents);

equality of opportunity across income groups; and mothers' opportunity to resume employment immediately after leave; the spider web illustrates the policy's opportunity potential for parents to keep their job while having a child, to care for the child themselves, and the child's to be cared for by both parents.

Results

Figure 2 demonstrates how diversified national policies on leave are, with Sweden coming closest to and Latvia farthest from the ideal provision of real opportunity for both parents and the child. We can see that countries, even those considered to have the best parental leave policies in the world, provide different opportunity structures, failing to fully support equal parental involvement in the raising of children across gender or/and income lines.

[**Figure 2.** Parental leave policies, 2015 (scores on a scale 1–8, maximum = 8), by country]

Only Sweden and Iceland provide comprehensive support for shared parenting, and thus a real opportunity for the child to be cared for by both parents. This is indicative of the social value ascribed to fatherhood, and represents a real opportunity for fathers to take a more active role in childcare. This is achieved by equal treatment of parents in terms of both the length of leave and its financial sustainability. Both countries offer post-natal leave as a single period and do not distinguish between leaves. That notwithstanding, they allocate one portion to the mother and the other to the father (as an individual and non-transferable right to 3 months each), and another as a family's joint right. Norwegian leave system is close to the two but with a shorter non-transferable paid leave for fathers (of ten weeks). The transferable period of leave is financially sustainable in all three countries and thus provides a real opportunity for parents to share it more equally. However, neither of the Nordic states provide real opportunities for parents across income groups because of the relatively low benefit caps. In Finland and Denmark legal opportunity for fathers to

use leave is not likely to be converted into a real opportunity (i.e. child's real opportunities to be with both parents) because fathers and mothers are not treated equally (with relatively short father quotas, of nine and two weeks, respectively) and/or financially unsustainable sharable portions of leave.

Similarly, the Baltic States do not provide real opportunities for parents to share leave, either. However, Lithuania is an exception. While Estonia and Latvia provide only two weeks of paternity leave, Lithuania entitles fathers to twice the paid time off. This four-week father's individual and non-transferable leave is still lower than in Sweden or Iceland, but mothers' entitlement is only slightly enhanced – thereby, parents are treated more equally than in Estonia or Latvia. Furthermore, parents in Lithuania can share a year-long financially sustainable leave, which provides real opportunities for a very young child to be with both. However, there is no entitlement to public childcare after the end of this one-year leave. Therefore, parents may resort to a two-year parental leave, of which the first year is paid at 70 per cent and the second at 40 per cent. However, relatively poor living standards and wide gender pay gaps make this system financially unviable, thus constraining both child's opportunities to be with both parents and mothers' to remain in the job market.

Surprisingly, parental leave systems in the Baltics provide more equal opportunities across income groups than in the Nordics because of their higher effective income-replacement rates. For example, Latvia does not impose benefit caps at all, thereby not reducing the replacement rate of income coverage. Similarly, the systems in Lithuania and Estonia operate with benefit ceilings that are less likely to damage the great majority of parents (e.g. in Lithuania the benefit cap equals to 3.2 times the average wage). By contrast, Denmark has the benefit cap for publicly financed parental leave set to only a half of the national average wage. Thus, public policy does not provide financially viable benefit for the majority of workers. This is largely compensated by the provisions via

collective agreements; however, these may not be equally generous across populations. Furthermore, approximately 75 per cent of the Danish workforce was covered by collective agreements in 2011; the income-replacement benefit for these workers was enhanced up to their former earnings by their employer (Bloksgaard and Rostgaard 2016). However, the share of the Danish workforce covered by collective agreements is declining, particularly among the younger age groups; this means that fewer workers get access to enhanced benefits via a collective agreement (*ibid.*). In Sweden, Norway and Finland collective agreements play a similarly significant role in providing effective income replacement during leave. On the one hand this may be an opportunity to advance progressive change in policy provision, of which Denmark is a good example: in 2007, their industrial sector had introduced a paid father's quota in parental leave and in 2008 a similar instrument was introduced for the public sector employees (Bloksgaard and Rostgaard 2016). On the other hand, such system creates inequality among different groups of workers within the country.

Countries further diverge in how they support women's opportunity to continuous employment. While Denmark, Finland, Sweden and Estonia facilitate mothers to resume employment immediately after leave (by guarantying or providing a place in public childcare without delay), other four lag behind. But whilst Sweden and Norway have no gap between the end of paid leave and public childcare, a child must be born before 1 September to have a place secured in a new school year); this creates a gap in practice. In Iceland, there is no legal entitlement to public childcare for the under-2s, with the widest gap in Lithuania and Latvia. Policy combination with no entitlement to public childcare diminishes leave's real opportunity potential: it lock mothers in personal care (thus constraints shared parenting) and disrupts income equality (commercial childcare is often an unaffordable alternative). Overall, the results demonstrate that family policies do not fit neatly the established welfare state types or the Nordic-Baltic divide.

Discussion and conclusion

The growing number of comparative welfare state studies focuses on family policies. However, they often overlook whether, and how the policy translates into *real* opportunity structures available to parents under different socio-economic contexts, and prevailingly assume equal impact of national provisions across different groups of parents. This article seeks to contribute to this research stream by examining the most prevalent form of family policy – parental leave, the instrument that lies at the intercept of employment, family and children, childcare and gender, and living standards.

The theoretical innovation we propose is the conceptualisation of leave as a real opportunity structure for parents to achieve valued functionings (i.e. child's real opportunity to be cared for by both parents and parent's opportunities to stay in the labour market while having the child), focusing on gender (Ciccia and Verloo 2012; Saxonberg 2013; Author) and income inequalities (Warren 2015). Our analytical framework is based on Author's (forthcoming) capability approach to comparative family policy analysis, merged with Javornik's (2014) ideal-types analysis. This combination enables us to define the ideal parental leave architecture and to assess parental leave systems of eight northern European countries against this model.

Our analytical framework acknowledges the impact of gender roles (culture) as well as economic constraints (sensitivity to household income shocks and gender pay gap) as the conditioning 'conversion factors' that translate institutional (*formal*) opportunities into the *real* ones. Against this background, an ideal-type leave is defined to minimize the policy-generated gender and class inequalities in parents' real opportunities to use leave, acknowledging that these are not embedded only in the leave system but stem also from the 'conversion factors' – i.e. variability in socio-economic contexts.

The benefit of applying the benchmarking and graphical analyses to comparative policy study is threefold. First, it allows us to go over policies with a fine-tooth comb, using the legal information

on national leave system. This information is commensurable across national leave systems and aptly depicts its salient features. Second, it develops a nuanced and comprehensive overview of national policies on leave, which helps to identify patterns that were largely undetected in previous research, and thus the variation among countries that have often been treated as representatives of a single policy model. And third, the resulting measures enable an easy visual representation of the policy across countries; albeit the results are relationally linked to the countries included in the analysis, the approach itself is applicable to a larger set of countries, which is its strength.

The results challenge the existing knowledge about the selected countries. First, national policies in the Nordic group are far from homogenous, not only in the degree to which leave creates real opportunities across gender and income (with the Swedish system being the most comprehensive and the Danish the least) but also in the dimensions through which these opportunities are shaped. For example, the results for Sweden confirm its overall gender-equal character: its system provides fathers with real opportunity to use leave (and thus the child with real opportunities to be cared for by both parents) and mothers to stay in the job market while with a child. That notwithstanding, the equality of opportunity across income groups is less pronounced. Other four countries provide less opportunity in one of the two dimensions: while Denmark and Finland facilitate mothers' opportunities to stay in the job market, they are less supportive of active fatherhood. By contrast, Iceland and Norway create child's opportunity to be with both parents but hinder mothers' smooth return to work by preserving the commercial service markets for the under-2s. Second, countries in the Baltic group also diverge in significant ways. For example, Estonia mirrors the Danish leave system (but with longer paid leave), providing more opportunity for a dual-earner than a dual-carer family model. This supports Lohman and Zagel's (2015) locating Estonia in the Nordic cluster. However, Lithuania exemplifies how a national policy may constrain parents' real opportunities in different ways. Namely, its leave system is closer to an ideal architecture than those of Estonia and Latvia (this supports Javornik's 2014 findings). By considering only the equality of parental involvement it could be paired with Fraser's (1994) universal caregiver model. However, the state

does not secure access to public childcare after this shorter fully-paid parental leave, but, instead, offers a financially unsustainable (particularly for fathers) extended leave. Such system is shaped by the subsidiarity principle, which stresses the primacy of financially supported family childcare, and thereby constrains mothers' opportunity to easily return to the labour market. Such inconsistency is often overlooked in previous studies, and can be revealed only when using more nuanced and comprehensive policy measures. Overall, our results suggest two conclusions. First, that principles underlying family policy may correlate with the underlying principles of the welfare state regimes (Javornik 2014; Gornick and Meyers 2003). Second, they support earlier findings that family policies do not fit neatly the established welfare state typologies (Leitner 2003; Ciccio and Verloo 2012; Korpi *et al.* 2013; Thévenon 2013; Javornik 2014; Dearing 2016). This leads us to conclude that national policy may be more fully captured when welfare state regimes are deconstructed into policy domains (e.g. Kasza 2002; Leitner 2003; Saraceno and Keck 2011), and when research focuses on more nuanced policy characteristics. In summary, the paper challenges a single policy cluster idea and offers an easy but comprehensive policy overview. The analytical framework enables developing new hypotheses and provides a valuable analytical instrument for academic and non-academic use, which could easily be employed to other policy domains and countries. However, it focuses on policies available to dual-earner heterosexual couples. To fully operationalize the proposed model of opportunity structure (real opportunities and valued functionings), future research should seek ways to more comprehensively incorporate meso- and company-level provisions and equality of opportunity for wider groups of parents (i.e. same-sex, adoptive and single parents, parents with more children and disabled children, resident and non-resident parents). Our empirical study is also limited in its ability to accommodate a wider range of relevant conversion factors (e.g. individual-, household- and meso-level factors, cultural and socio-economic contexts such as beliefs, attitudes and norms, income needs and preferences). Incorporating these would provide a more complete landscape of the opportunity/constraint structure, strengthen the model's analytical and interpretative capacity, and improve the modelling

of policy implications and individual-level decision-making processes. This would better inform the public and company-level policy-making process that could even out these imbalances, and thus provide real opportunities for different groups of individuals to achieve valued functionings once they become parents.

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Notes

¹ Including individual and non-transferable rights for mothers (in the form of maternity and/or mothers' quotas in the system); father's individual and non-transferable rights (paternity and father's quota in parental leave); and joint rights for parents (transferable/sharable parts of leave), which allows us to compare different leave systems across countries.

² In terms of mothering, for example, media constructs personify polarized acceptable and unacceptable forms of motherhood. These constructs have recently set up the same polarized dynamics for men, but emphasising masculine economic reliability alongside emotional and caring involvement surpassing the traditional breadwinner role (e.g. the father who fails to look after his family versus the 'new man' who does). In many countries this can be exemplified by the rise of the new rhetoric of 'shared parenting', which often constructs and results from parental and paternity leave system (Javornik and Oliver 2015).

³ Reservation wage, i.e. the net wage at which an individual considers employment to be worthwhile, reflects the utility of time with newborn child, including the value of home production, measured in the price of market production (Blau and Ferber 1992).

⁴ The loss in effective parental leave replacement rate due to public provisions is made up for 75% of workers through collective agreements (Kosłowski *et al.* 2016).

⁵ Hobson (2014) does not make the distinction between means and converting factors and only identifies the latter. These include social rights, care benefits and services, organizational culture, social equality of jobs and working times/flexibility, in addition to individual factors (skills, gender, class, age, family support) and societal factors (cultural norms, social movements, media).

⁶ It should be noted that policy provisions related to same-sex or adopting parents, whether or not regulated by national laws, are not subject of this study.

⁷ We adapt the OECD (2016) methodology for calculating FRE and apply it to an individual and non-transferable leave available to each parent. Full details available at: http://www.oecd.org/els/soc/PF2_1_Parental_leave_systems.pdf

⁸ Previous studies largely use the term 'well-paid leave' to describe financially viable leave which does not discourage fathers from taking it (for them, financial considerations are particularly important). However, these studies use crude (legally defined) income replacement rates (RR) to define a well-paid leave. To avoid confusion we propose a new concept as described in the text.

⁹ We use the median of the values proposed in the literature: Saxonberg (2013): 67%; Wall *et al.* (2009): 36): 70%; Gornick and Meyers (2003: 122): 80%.

¹⁰ ARR is limited to 100 per cent. We assume that relatively high living standards do not render gender pay gaps or household income shocks irrelevant.

¹¹ Javornik used the 1-8 scale to follow the principle of geometric sequence, so that logarithms used for her index score yielded an arithmetic sequence. We made several sensitivity tests for different scales (linear, different scores); the results have not changed and hence we consider her scale robust enough for our purposes.

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