

Female same-sex couples act long-term financially rational?¹

Abstract

One of the challenges faced by research on the gendered transition to parenthood is how to dismantle the interconnected nature of biology, gender and economic reasoning. We contribute to this aim by comparing division of parental leave in different-sex couples (DSC) and female same-sex couples (SSC). Motherhood identity formation appears to be strong in DSC as well as SSC. Net of this, gender is an important predictor of parental leave in DSC. To some extent, SSC seem to divide the leave in a more long-term financially rational way than DSC do.

Keywords: gender, parental leave, same-sex couple

ALTHOUGH GENDER EQUALITY in paid and unpaid work has increased in Western societies, the trend has slowed in the most recent decades. Men's unpaid work has not increased to the extent that could be expected, and the gender wage gap has been resistant to change after the stabilization of women's labour force participation (e.g., Boye & Evertsson 2014; Boye, Halldén & Magnusson 2017). Researchers have argued that the gendered division of paid and unpaid work that is established when couples become parents is the most important reason for lasting inequalities in the labour market, including the gender wage gap and gender unequal access to authority positions (for an overview, see Evertsson & Boye 2016). A question that has challenged researcher is why the gendered division of care work and labour market work remains, despite its consequences for women's careers and its presumed (negative) impact on men's relationships with their children. Research on the topic has been abundant but even so, the theoretical drivers of the process have remained elusive. Part of the reason for this is that in most couples, a person's gender is inseparable from biological sex and from determinants of who carries the child, gives birth and (if at all) breastfeeds the baby. In addition, income and occupational prestige correlates with gender. Comparative advantage in the household and in the labor market is inevitably linked to gender, making it difficult to separate financially rational decision making from gender

1 The descriptive statistics referred to are part of a more comprehensive empirical and theoretical analysis in a manuscript under review at the *European Sociological Review* (in November 2017).

norms and expectations in different-sex couples. One potential way around the fact that it is impossible to vary the gender of the parents in a couple in order to discriminate between theories on gender, specialization and relative resources, is to compare different-sex couples (DSC) to same-sex couples (SSC). Focusing on the transition to parenthood in female SSC and DSC while holding observables constant, we study the division of care (i.e. parental leave) in couples with comparable labor market income, education and age, thereby getting closer to netting out gender.

Why is the transition to parenthood (still) gendered?

The transition to parenthood is framed by institutional context, norms and expectations. As an example, the degree to which mothers return to the job that they had before the birth of the child, or quit work, varies with social policies and gender culture (Aisenbrey, Evertsson & Grunow 2009). According to current discourses on parenthood, the fact that the (birth) mother is the parent who has carried the child during pregnancy and – in most cases – breastfeeds the child, creates a special bond between the mother and child (e.g. Grunow & Evertsson 2016). This discourse shapes birth mothers' identity formation and has important implications for what parents consider to be in the best interest of the child. Linked to this, societal norms and ideals with regard to the 'good' mother and father shape the degree to which the mother and her partner will spend time away from paid work to care for the small child. Money also matters and one important reason why many couples divide care and paid work unequally is that it is financially rational for the family. In DSC, men on average earn more than women do and fathers' labour market prospects often are better than mothers' are. Consequently, it is rational – at least in the short-term perspective – for the person earning the most to invest mainly in paid work and the person earning the least to invest mainly in unpaid work and care (cf. Becker 1981). Although this is what theory and earlier research on DSC indicate, shifting the perspective to SSC puts these results on their head.

Financially irrational or long-term rational same-sex parents?

Based on Swedish population register data, we study parental leave uptake in couples in which the birth mother, aged 20–49, had her first child within a SSC or DSC in the period 2003–2011. Focusing on those with a clear link to the labour market, both partners' income the year before first birth is at least SEK 80 000 (converted to 2012 years' value, close to 8 500 EUR in 2017 currency rates).²

2 Among SSC, we can identify couples who are in a registered partnership or married. Among DSC, we can also identify parental couples who never married during the period. We include couples who entered cohabitation/marriage before the birth of the first child, during the birth year or the year after the child's birth.

Table 1. Characteristics of the partners in DSC and SSC, descriptive statistics.

	Birth mother SSC	Birth mother DSC	Social mother SSC	Father DSC
Income year before 1st birth (Euro)	30 360	26 970	30 180	34 060
Educ. <= 2 years post-upper sec.	9.7	9.4	12.2	21.2
Long post-upper sec./univ. < 3 years	34.2	43.9	38.7	47.6
Long university educ. >= 3 years	56.1	46.7	49.1	31.2
Age at 1st birth	33.1	29.9	34.11	32.3
N	424	226 681	424	226 681
Parental leave days birth year + 1	209.2	256.2		
	N=424	N=226 681		
Parental leave days birth year + 2			123.3	75.4
			N=259	N=134 679
Share of parental leave birth year + 2	0.66	0.79	0.34	0.21
	N=259	N=134 679	N=259	N=134 679

The within-couple income gap the year before first birth is considerably bigger in DSC than in SSC (see Table 1). As expected, fathers have the highest income of all whereas mothers in DSC have the lowest income. In SSC, the birth mother is often the woman with the highest income as well as education. This speaks against specialization theory according to which it is rational to let the partner with fewest labour market resources specialize in care. Economic rationality may still play a role though; in many SSC, women take turns giving birth and given that both may become birth mothers in the end, it may be rational to let the person who has come the furthest in her career be the first to give birth.³

Applying identity theory to parenthood, we expect the motherhood identity to be highly salient and linked to internalized role expectations to prioritize the child. Linked to this are norms regarding the infant's need of its birth mother and discourses on the importance of breastfeeding (Grunow & Evertsson 2016). Consequently, we expect birth mothers to take a longer leave than their partner. Descriptive statistics (Table 1) indicate support for this assumption; the birth mother takes the longest leave in both DSC (256 days) and SSC (209 days). Parents often use five instead of seven days of paid leave per week so this corresponds to about 13 months for DSC and 10 months

3 Female couples who are cohabiting have the right to medically assisted insemination and IVF. Treatment cost for a first child is the same as the regular (subsidized) patient's fee, i.e. a few hundred SEK. However, treatment to have a second child is not counted as part of regular health care and is considerably more costly.

for SSC. This leave is on average longer than the prescribed breastfeeding period of six months, indicating that identity formation plays a role in both groups of couples.

As earlier discussed, we expect gender to influence the division of leave in DSC. Although ideals have changed and care is an integral part of modern fatherhood, expectations on fathers still mainly link to paid work and breadwinning. Hence, we expect birth mothers in SSC to take a shorter leave than mothers in DSC and we expect fathers to take a shorter leave than social mothers. Also this hypothesis is confirmed. As we saw above, birth mothers in SSC take fewer leave days in the year of birth and the following year than do mothers in DSC. Social mothers take on average 123 days of leave (approx. 6 months) in the birth year + the following two years compared to 75 days (almost 4 months) for fathers.

In the best of worlds, we would like to compare DSC and SSC that are as equal as possible on background characteristics. Therefore, we estimate a nearest neighbour matching model in order to check whether the average difference in parental leave uptake between birth mothers in SSC and mothers in DSC remains when we match the couples on the partners' (individual) income the year before the birth, age of each partner, education, year of observation and birth month of the child. The difference in parental leave uptake is presented as the average treatment effect on the treated. It is highly significant and amounts to a difference of 32 days when same-sex birth mothers are compared to different-sex mothers. In other words, the matching model indicates that birth mothers in SSC take about six weeks shorter leave (if uptake is five days per week) than do mothers in DSC.

Summing up, our results indicate that motherhood identity formation and norms linked to the infant's need of its birth mother are strong in DSC as well as SSC. Net of this, gender is an important and significant predictor of parental leave uptake in DSC. In these couples, the mother, who most often has weaker labour market resources than the father, tends to be the one making the largest adjustments of labour market work by taking considerably longer parental leave, working part time etc. This may be rational in a short-term perspective but less so in a long-term perspective as a faster return to paid work and/or a more equally divided parental leave should benefit mothers' careers. SSC often choose the person with the stronger labour market resources as the (first) birth mother. Although parental leave uptake is not equally divided either in SSC or in DSC, taking turns to give birth and be on leave may contribute to more evenly shared parenting in SSC than our results indicate. SSC seems to be guided by more long-term financial rationality than DSC are and in addition, equality and fairness more likely enters the discussion (cf. Malmquist 2015).

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