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The central European world of fatherhood policies: how individual attitudes mediate the norm of threeness in the Czech Republic and Slovakia

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ABSTRACT

Here is the shorter abstract: Following Rush's suggestion to explore differences across cultures, our study compares the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Applying Rush's discussion of how individual attitudes function as mediators, we analyse how attitudes mediate the norm of threeness. We interviewed 79 parents in both countries and our results show that despite the cultural differences between the countries, there is great support for the norm of threeness. Nevertheless, individual attitudes mediate between culture differently among men than women. About 1/3 of fathers would ideally want to share part of the leave time while no mothers support this. Furthermore, most men would prefer to share the leave time if there were no economic loss, while few mothers support the idea. Apparently, mothers do not trust fathers. Our interviews give reason to believe that if well-paid father quotas were introduced and more fathers went on leave, mothers would start to trust fathers.

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As this article is for a special issue devoted to Michael Rush, the research question of this paper is: *how could one apply Rush's ideas to analysing the situation of fathers going on parental leave in the Czech and Slovak Republics?* We argue that the concepts he developed to analyse the Anglo-Saxon and Nordic world need to be modified to deal with post-communist countries like the Czech and Slovak Republics. More specifically, Kremer's (2007) notion of 'national ideals of care' is a fruitful way to build on Rush, although we have to develop categories specific to the post-communist experience; therefore, our categories differ from Kremer's. We are not denying that there are other possible approaches, such as the agency and capabilities approach, the rational-egoist economic approach, the role of international organizations, the mobilization of women, the influence of religious organizations such as the Catholic Church etc. However, we will not discuss them, as we have already done so in our previous

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publications (e.g. Hašková & Saxonberg, 2016; Saxonberg, 2014), and in line with the thematic focus of this issue, we focus on discussing Rush's approach.

Rush (2011) contrasts the Anglo-Saxon, neo-liberal world of fatherhood policies that emphasizes human agency with the Swedish world that emphasizes social structures and the goal of supporting gender equality. He concentrates on the policies and public discourses of particular countries at the macro level more than the actual attitudes of parents toward their roles, although he also provides a framework for studying the micro level (Seward & Rush, 2016, p. 28). Thus, 'individual attitudes function to some extent "as a mediator between culture and practice."' He also notes that 'researchers should explore differences in work and family balance, integration, and interaction across all cultures' (2016, p. 27).

Following Rush's suggestion to explore differences across cultures, our study compares differences between the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Both had previously belonged to Czechoslovakia, and since the breakup, both countries have continued to have rather similar policies, but have different cultures, as Slovakia is more conservative, Catholic, and rural than the Czech Republic. The policies of both countries have emphasized somewhat social structures in that they do not see childcaring as simply an individual choice. Still, instead, they envision state policy supporting specific social structures (i.e. the continued system in which mothers should have complete responsibility for caring for children until a certain age). The Czech and Slovak policymakers have in common with Nordic policymakers that they have social structures rather than individuals as their starting point. Yet, this has not led to the 'Nordic turn' that Rush (2015) envisions, in which policies encourage father to go on parental leave, because in contrast to the Swedish world of fatherhood policies, Czech and Slovak policymakers have done so to support a 'national ideal of care' (Kremer, 2007) based on *the norm of threeness*.

According to this norm, which we discuss below, *mothers should work full-time before having children and after their children reach the age of three, but the mothers should stay at home full-time with their child until they reach the age of three*. This norm is explained in more detail below.

Applying Rush's discussion of how individual attitudes function as mediators, we analyse how attitudes mediate the norm of threeness. Just because the state supports this norm does not mean that the population automatically internalizes it. Eurostat polling data from 2010 indicates strong support for this norm in that the vast majority of Czechs and Slovaks think that the mother should be the primary carer until the child is three, and then the child should attend daycare (discussed in Saxonberg, 2014). We do so based on interviews with parents in Slovakia and the Czech Republic.

This article proceeds by presenting our theoretical approach that builds on Rush and Kremer. Then it explains our methodology before analysing our interviews with parents of young children in the Czech and Slovak Republics. Finally, our conclusion shows how our modified form of Kremer's national ideal of care combined with Rush can help us understand the situation.

Theoretical approach: social structures, human agency and the national idea of care

To begin with, we will place the Czech and Slovak family policies in a comparative, European perspective. Then we will discuss how we can build upon Rush's approach by

combining it with Kremer's (2007) notion of 'national ideals of care.' As Rush (2011) argues, the Swedish model of family policy takes an analysis of the structural situation as its starting point. Current Swedish policy is based on the desire to support gender equality in the labour market, which includes a combination of increased support for daycare and parental leaves based on the income-replacement principle, and the introduction of 'daddy months' reserved only for the father (Saxonberg, 2014). In terms of Kremer's (2007) national ideal of caring, the Swedish model is based on the combination of the ideal of parental sharing and the ideal of professional care. Rush (2015) notices that countries have tended to move toward this Swedish type of family policy to greater or lesser degrees.

In contrast to the Swedish model based on an analysis of the structural situation, Rush (2011) writes that the Anglo-Saxon countries have a discourse that emphasizes human agency. Countries such as Ireland and the USA apply a neo-liberal approach that emphasizes freedom of choice and limited government or 'patriarchal familism' (p. 44). This approach leads to 'an exaggerated emphasis on human agency that generally fails to address the limitations and often punitive nature of neo-liberal approaches to family welfare' (p. 51). Fathers are seen as being able to provide 'complementary parenting within marriage' (p. 52) rather than equal parents, who can care directly for the child as well as the mother. Kremer (2007, p. 226, 74) argues that before New Labour came to power, free-market-oriented Great Britain previously had a national ideal of care based on the surrogate mother – that is, the mother should do that caring, but if she is unable, then she should hire somebody else to replace her while she is away (such as a nanny or babysitter).

Rush does not include other types of welfare states or regimes in his discussions; thus, he does not present a complete typology. When it comes to gender and family policy, there are many competing typologies. We prefer the typology based on degrees of degenderization (Saxonberg, 2013; Saxonberg and Szelewa, 2021). According to this typology, the Anglo-Saxon countries basically follow *implicitly genderizing policies*, in that it is individually oriented in emphasizing human agency, so that the market rather than the state should be the main tool for solving caring problems, such as daycare and parental leaves. Given the patriarchal starting point, in which women traditionally have sole responsibility for the household and employers expect women and not men to stay at home with the children, given the fact that the fathers in heterosexual families normally earn more money than the mothers, then market-oriented policies implicitly encourage mothers to stay at home with the children, while fathers work. Since daycare is mostly private in this model, daycare institutions are also expensive. Therefore, these policies implicitly encourage mothers to stay at home rather than work and send their children to daycare, which implicitly encourages men and women to have separate gender roles.

Meanwhile, the Nordic countries basically follow *denderizing policies* in that, as Rush notes, they take into account existing social structures and actively promote the elimination of gender roles. They do so by providing parental leaves that encourage fathers to share in the leaves both by providing insurance-based parental leave benefits (usually 80% of previous salary), so that fathers will not lose much money if they go on leave and by introducing 'daddy months' in which some months of the parental leave time are also reserved for fathers. They also encourage the elimination of gender roles by making it easier for women to return sooner to work through heavy government

subsidization of daycare. Thus, Kremer notes the national ideal of caring is based on the ideal of parental sharing and the ideal of professional care.

A third type of policy exists, which Rush does not analyse: the *explicitly genderizing* model in which the state explicitly encourage mothers to stay at home for long periods to care for their children. Rather long maternity leaves or parental leaves that pay a flat rate are typical for this model. Fathers have little incentive for taking the leaves because, since fathers usually earn more than the mothers, they reason they would lose too much money if they went on the leave. In addition, there are no father quotas. Typically, in such countries, the government does not subsidize daycare for children under three, but it does subsidize kindergartens for pre-school children over three – although often these schools are only open part-time, as the goal of these schools is more pedagogical than to enable mothers to return to work. Countries such as Luxemborg and Italy, as well as Austria belong to this category – although recent reforms in Austria provide for several different models (Saxonberg & Szelewa, 2021). The other European countries have hybrid models.

The Czech and Slovak republics belong to a different world than the Anglo-Saxon (implicitly genderizing) and Nordic worlds (degenderizing) that Rush (2011) discusses, although they have some elements of both. Similar to the Nordic model, both countries have family policies based on an analysis of social structures, but going back to the 1960s, successive governments have promoted policies based on *the norm of threeness: the mother should work full-time until she has children. Then she should stay at home full-time with the child until the child reaches the age of three, after which she should go back to working full-time* (Saxonberg, 2014). Even though this ideal of care has a lot in common with the conservative model, which is *explicitly genderizing*, there are some important differences. The Czech and Slovak model sees women as full-time workers rather than housewives, but it has in common with the explicitly genderizing model that fathers are only seen as breadwinners, while women are the sole caregivers. Both countries give high levels of support to children over three to attend kindergartens, as daycare attendance for children over three is among the highest in Europe (Saxonberg & Szelewa, 2021). Meanwhile, these governments largely stopped funding nurseries for children under three, leaving parents little alternatives to going on parental leave until their children reach the age of three. Thus, by 2017 only 6.5% of Czech children under three were attending institutional daycare and in Slovakia it was even lower at .6 (Eurostat cited in Saxonberg & Szelewa, 2021). Even though the Hungarian and Polish models support the norm of threeness, they have done so less strongly than the Czech and Slovak Republics (see Saxonberg, 2014; and Takács, 2020 for discussions of this).

The parental leaves also reinforce this norm of threeness by first providing 6-month maternity leaves based on the income replacement level, combined with parental leaves until the child reaches the age of three. The flat rates are so low that fathers have little incentive to partake in these leaves, given the fact that fathers in most families have higher incomes than the mothers, so the family stands to lose money if the father is the one to go on leave (cf. Kuchařová & Psychlová, 2016). Even though the Czech Republic slightly diverged from the norm of threeness in paying caring allowances until the child is four years old, few parents use this right because their right to return to their former job is only guaranteed for three years. A reform in 2008 allows parents in the Czech Republic to choose between receiving the benefits for 2-year, 3-year or 4-years,

but the total amount of money that the parent receives is the same regardless of long the parents stay at home. The reform simply means that if parents remain at home until the child is two, they get more money per month, and if they stay at home until the child is four, they get less money per month, but the total amount of benefits is the same. Moreover, this two-year option is only available to parents with an income above a certain level. Just as parents have little incentive to stay at home until the child is four because they would lose the right to return to their job, they also have little incentive to return to work when the child is two, because there are very few public daycare places and private daycare is prohibitively expensive for most families. Furthermore, not all parents have high enough incomes to qualify for the two-year leave. Therefore, in practice, Czech policy reinforces the norm of threeness nearly as much as Slovak policy.

This model makes it more difficult for parents to balance work and family life, as it hinders fathers from going on parental leave (and sharing more of the family life) and it hinders mothers from working for longer periods and forces them back into the family for these three-year periods. As Hobson et al. (2011) write in their analysis of the agency and capabilities approach, there is a gap between the rights and the ability to exercise them: without economic incentives for fathers to go on parental leave and without a public discourse that encourages fathers to do so, not many fathers will exercise their right to go on parental leave.

The influence of this norm of threeness can be seen in [Table 1](#):

Employment rates for mothers with children under three are very low for both countries, but employment rates radically increase once the children are over three. The table also shows that very few women work part-time. Thus, most women either work full-time or are taking care of children under three years old.

Even though this model has in common with the Nordic countries the idea that policy should be based on supporting social structures, it also shares some elements of the Anglo-Saxon model based on neo-liberal notions of human agency. First, similar to the Anglo-Saxon countries, parents are given freedom of choice to decide how long to stay at home, but also similar to Anglo-Saxon countries, this policy comes from an underlying support of patriarchal ideals whereby mothers are the main carers and fathers can only complement them. After the fall of the communist regime, Czechoslovakia opened parental leave benefits for fathers, but fathers did not get the legal right to get their jobs back after receiving the benefits until the EU demanded this as one of the points for accession (Hašková, Saxonberg & Mudrak, 2013; Saxonberg, 2014).

Second, similar to Great Britain, in the cases in which the mother wants to return early to work before the child is three, Czech and Slovak policies rely on the idea that parents

Table 1. Maternal employment rate (%) for women (15–64-year-olds) with at least one child aged 0–14.

Child:	Aged 0–2	Aged 3–5	Aged 6–14	Employment rates (a child aged 0–14)	Employed part-time	Employed full-time	No information
CR	21.7	78.9	92.3	67.0	6.1	60.8	0.1
SR	19.2	70.9	86.0	61.8	5.0	54.7	2.1

Resource: OECD family database, 2019 <https://www.oecd.org/els/family/database.htm>, 2. The labour market position of families (LMF) / LMF1.2 Maternal employment / Chart LMF1.2.C + Chart LMF1.2.A

will either turn to intergenerational support (i.e. grandmothers) or in the worst case, surrogate mothers (i.e. babysitters as a granny tradition does not exist).

Even if both Czech and Slovak national ideals of care are based on the norm of three-ness, we follow Seward and Rush (2016) in anticipating that individual attitudes can become a mediator between culture and practice. Therefore, we carried out interviews with Czech and Slovak mothers and fathers in order to investigate how these individual attitudes actually mediate.

Method

Before the breakout of the COVID pandemic, we conducted 79 semi-structured interviews with mothers and fathers of 6-year or 7-year old children from different urban areas. We contacted the principals of two schools in each city, and through the principles, we got in touch with the teachers, who helped us recruit parents who were willing to participate in the interviews. We chose parents from schools in a predominantly working-class area (in the periphery) and in a middle-class area for each city centre to compare parents with varying degrees of educational and income levels. This is the cheapest method for finding parents from different class backgrounds who recently had to make decisions about who should care for their children. By choosing these parents, we could interview those who recently had to make concrete choices about who should care for their children until they began school so their memories of their caring decisions would still be fresh. That is, in both countries, children do not begin school until the age of 6–7, which means that before this age parents must decide whether or not they will send their children to daycare.

We conducted 20 interviews in Bratislava and in Banská Bystrica in Slovakia, as well as 20 interviews in Prague and 19 ones in Brno in the Czech Republic. We chose the largest cities of each country, as we are more likely to see variations in gender roles and attitudes in cities than in more conservative rural areas. In other words, we were more interested in getting the largest possible variation in answers rather than getting a representative sample.

We also chose an equal number of fathers and mothers and an equal number of parents to increase the variation. Given the low number of parents we could interview, we limited ourselves to ethnic Czechs and Slovaks and excluded immigrants, those with Roma or Hungarian backgrounds, as this would complicate the interviews by bringing in another dimension. We coded the interviews based on their gender (M = male, W = female), their city (*P* = Prague, *Br* = Brno, *B* = Bratislava, *Ba* = Banská Bystrica), and the type of area where they lived (MC = middle-class neighbourhood, WC = working-class neighbourhood). Thus, interviewee MPMC3 would be a male living in Prague, in a middle-class neighbourhood, and he would be the third person in this category whom we interviewed.

We drew up a list of questions for conducting semi-structured interviews, so that we would ask the same questions to all parents. However, we also asked follow-up questions to get clarifications. Then we coded the interviews and translated them from Czech and Slovak to English. We first used open source codes. In the next step, we looked at the links between the codes. In the final stage of coding, for both their actual and their ideal solutions, we created categories.

We chose the Czech Republic and Slovakia because both countries have similar family policies, but still display cultural differences in family values. For example, studies show that the more secular Czechs are relatively more favourable toward gender equality than the more Catholic Slovaks (Saxonberg & Sirovátka, 2006). Some small differences are emerging in parental leave policies between the Czech Republic and Slovakia. For example, the Czech Republic added a fourth year of parental benefits in 1995 (Act 117/1995), while in Slovakia benefits are paid until the child reaches the age of three. In addition, in 2006, the Czech Republic doubled the flat-rate benefit level, making it more than twice as high as in Slovakia (Act 490/2006). Finally, in 2008 the Czech Republic replaced the completely flat-rate benefit with a three-tier benefit, which pays more per month if one chooses to stay at home for a shorter period and pays less per month if one decides to stay at home for a longer period. Thus, these two countries are much more similar in their parental leave policies and childcare policies than their neighbouring post-communist countries (see Saxonberg & Szelewa, 2021 for details).

The norm of threeness: the mother (not father) should stay at home until the child is three

This section discusses to what extent the interviewees accept the notion that the mother should stay at home with the child until the child reaches the age of three. Even though this is more about the mother than the father, it obviously includes the father, since it shows that most respondents think that the mother should stay at home, which excludes the father from staying at home. This section also shows how individual attitudes mediate between culture and practice: when practice pressures parents to break with the norm of threeness, their attitudes also tend to change. If practice can change parents' attitudes about how long children should stay at home, then practice can also change attitudes about whether fathers should go on parental leave.

In understanding why the norm of threeness arose, one should keep in mind that in both countries, the main form of daycare consists of kindergartens that are publicly funded and open for children older than three. In some cases, they can take in younger children, but these are mostly children who will soon turn three. In the communist era, the nurseries were under the Ministry of Health and were run like mini-hospitals, with nurses rather than teachers taking care of the children (Saxonberg, 2014; Wagnerová, 2007). This hospital-like atmosphere, combined with overcrowding, gave these institutions poor reputations (Saxonberg, 2014; Čermáková, 2002). The overcrowding also led to high rates of illness among children (cf. Saxonberg, 2014). Even though nurseries and kindergartens have existed in the region since the middle of the 1800s, kindergartens were much more widespread and nurseries relatively rare (Saxonberg, 2014). The communist regime quickly greatly expanded the nurseries (Saxonberg, 2014). In addition, a discourse developed in which psychologists started to claim that early childcare could lead to deprivation among children (cf. Hašková, Saxonberg, & Mudrák, 2013). Consequently, the population tends to associate nurseries with the communist system, with the health and psychological problems that they associate with them. Thus, when the interviewees were asked about daycare for children under three, they usually had the communist-era mini-hospitals in mind, which caused them to express hostile views toward the institution.

In addition, popular psychologists in both countries continue to propagate the norm of threeness and argue that the mother rather than the father should be the one to stay at home for this period. For example, in the Czech Republic, the university lecturer Lenka Šulová (2009, p. 10) claims that it is necessary 'to truly fight at least for the first three years so that the child can stay in the family.' Similarly, the then head of the Czech Psychological Association, Jaroslav Šturma (1998), argued that the child should stay at home for the first three years, and it is 'natural' for the mother to be the sole person who takes care of the child for these three years. He labels attempts at inducing fathers to share in the leave time a 'false emancipation' and adds that 'we can see that men's intuitive parenting is no good because he does not have an opportunity for a close symbiotic communication and cohabitation with the child.'

In Slovakia, popular psychologists display similar views. For example, one Slovak psychologist from the Research Institute for Child Psychology and Pathopsychology in Bratislava argues that children under three should only attend nurseries 'for three or four hours, if the mother needs to arrange something. At the age of three the child is socially mature enough for being separated from its family and for spending time in a collective' (Eva Smiková interviewed in Šimurková, 2009). Again, the discourse is not only about the need for the child to stay at home until the age of three, the national ideal of care also implies that the *mother* should be the one staying at home. Thus, despite elements of the Anglo-Saxon view of human agency creeping in the later reforms on parental leave, policymakers, and the public discourse is still basically following what Rush (2011) would call the social structural approach. Still, it is one based on patriarchy and separate gender roles revolving around the national ideal of care with its norm of threeness.

Given this environment, it is not surprising that the interviewees basically accepted this norm of threeness and thought that three was the ideal age for children to begin going to daycare (i.e. kindergartens). In Slovakia, only 5 of 40 interviewees would have liked to send their children to public daycare before the age of three, while two others would have preferred private care. Similarly, in the Czech Republic, only 3 of 39 parents would have liked to send their children to public daycare before the age of three and 2 would have preferred private care. In Slovakia, all the parents used psychological arguments (but some added pedagogical reasons) as to when children should begin daycare. In the Czech Republic, psychological arguments were also the most commonly used, as 26 of 39 used psychological arguments, with 5 using pedagogical and 16 using arguments centring around the need for children to be social and be part of a collective when they turn three.¹ Examples of psychological arguments in favour of waiting until the children are three before sending children to kindergartens when they are three years old include, for example, 'At three years old, the children can learn, more naturally, whether someone is obedient or disobedient and that somebody takes toys, and others do not' (MBRMC1).

In both countries, the vast majority believe that nurseries do not help children develop their skills. However, this belief is limited to threeness, as they are generally supportive of kindergartens and believe that children should attend daycare at some point, because once they reach this 'proper' age, they need to be with other children to develop psychologically and because kindergarten teachers are able to teach the children things that the parents are not capable of doing. This also shows that they cannot imagine pre-school for

children under three having anything to do with pedagogy, because they accept the mini-hospital, healthcare model as ‘normal’ for nurseries. They are not aware that in most Western countries, preschool facilities employees for children under three are either teachers or childminders, rather than nurses.

When asked, ‘if free daycare were available and you were convinced that the quality were very high, would that have influenced your decision?’ one Czech mother admitted that she might have been willing to send her child there at the age of two, but only up to 4 hours per day:

It might have influenced me to put the children there for a certain part of the day. At the age of two, they could have gone there for the mornings. That way, the combination of work and children would have functioned. I would have spent 4 hours doing some activities relating to my job. Perhaps the child would have eaten at the daycare, and after lunch, I would have picked them up and devoted myself fully to the child. I think it would have been ideal this way. (WPMC4)

So even if she were willing to diverge partially from threeness if the conditions were ideal and high-quality daycare was available for children under three, she still would have waited until her child was two, and even then, she would not have sent her child to daycare for more than four hours.

This statement that a Slovak father made gives a typical view of how most Czech and Slovak respondents reasoned when accepting the mythology of threeness, while supporting daycare for children above three:

In my opinion, the child should stay with his or her mother as long as possible, but on the other hand, when it’s time for the child to go to the kindergarten, the collective is needed as well so that child can learn. I think it’s convenient to stay with the mother until the age of three and then go to a kindergarten. Because if the child stays with the mother until the age of six at home, it misses a lot of things. It doesn’t have contact with other children, and so it can’t learn many new things. So, I think it’s good like this. (MBMC1)

Most respondents said the same thing but in slightly different wording.

It is worth noting that once again, the norm of threeness is *not* limited to the notion that the children should stay at home for the first three years, because the ‘collective’ is somehow harmful for children younger than three years. It is also strongly connected to the notion that the *mother* should be the child’s sole carer and that a child needs to join a collective with other children at the age of 3 when s/he starts to attend kindergarten.

However, if parents had even indirect experience with other options (e.g. they had friends abroad and/or had lived in a country where it is common for children under three to attend pre-school), their views on the caring for young children diverged from the national ideal of care. For example, one Slovak father, who as a scientist has many foreign friends, admits he could imagine sending his children to daycare before the age of three if the quality were high and if it were affordable, both of which continue to be problems in Slovakia:

Actually, maybe yes [we would send the children to daycare under those conditions]. We have many friends from abroad, where the system force people, mothers especially, to give children to nurseries at an early age. As we know them personally and we see that the children are completely normal and that it simply works like that there, I

think if there was such opportunity here, we would try it. But there is no such opportunity here in Slovakia, because you have to pay for a nursery and it's quite expensive. (MBMC4)

In Slovakia, three parents actually did send their children to public daycare before the age of three, but at 2.5 years, it was still close to the three ideal. 12 more did at times use part-time private alternatives when their children were over two but under three-years-old. In the Czech Republic, only three parents used public daycare before the age of three, and two used part-time private alternatives, such as relatives. The main reasons they gave were that the mother felt forced to return to work because of financial pressures. They were afraid of losing their professional skills and/or because their children were very sociable and preferred going to daycare.

Interestingly, the Czech mother, who sent her child to daycare before the age of two, had a very positive experience with it. When asked how the nursery was, she replied:

Excellent. Completely fantastic! We even wrote them a commendatory letter because there were just two nurses and one helper for ten children. They always had enough for the children to do for the whole week.. ... They were fantastic. Excellent! (WBrMC2)

This answer also shows the interaction between institutions and cultural norms: if one has direct or indirect experiences with high-quality daycare for children under three or one knows people with such experiences, one is more likely to question the mythology of threeness. In fact, one Slovak father, who sent his child to a nursery, claims that it was 'totally brilliant and so was the kindergarten' (MBMC5). This again shows that when people actually have experience with high-quality daycare, their norms are likely to change. Thus, when the national ideal of caring says the child should stay home with the mother until the age of three, but circumstances force a change of practice, attitudes mediate between the two: a sort of cognitive dissonance emerges that can cause the parents to change their views. Logically, the same should be true about paternity leaves: if circumstances or policies pressure fathers to stay at home with the children, then the attitudes of the mothers and fathers are likely to change.

Can fathers share in the leave?

According to the national ideal of care in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, the mother should stay at home with the child until it reaches the age of three, but must the carer always really be the *mother*? One could imagine that because of negative experiences with communist-era nurseries, which, as noted above, were overcrowded and run like min-hospitals with nurses rather than teachers, little attention was paid to the children's psychological or pedagogical needs, and had high rates of children becoming ill (e.g. Saxonberg, 2014; Čermáková, 2002; Hašková, Maříková & Uhde, 2009), parents believe that the child should stay at home for three years. However, the mother doesn't need to be the one, who does all the caring, as after the mother finishes breastfeeding, it could be possible for the father to share in the leave time. During the communist era, no discourse emerged about whether fathers could share in the leave time, but after the fall, people living in the Czech and Slovak Republics get more exposed to the international discourse about the need for fathers to share more equally in the leave time (cf. Lutherová, Maříková & Válková, 2017; Maříková, 2008, 2009).

Of the 40 Slovaks we interviewed, only 4 would have liked to have the father share in the leave time, and all those stating this were men. In the Czech Republic, women were a bit more supportive as 2 women and 3 men said that they would have liked to have a shared parental leave. When asked if they should have wanted to have the father share in the leave time if the father would receive 100 percent of his income, 18 of the 40 Slovaks responded in the affirmative, which indicates that policies do matter. Surprisingly, only 4 of the 20 women would have wanted the fathers to share in the leave time compared to 14 of the 20 fathers.

Typical replies that Czech and Slovak mothers gave were: 'I think the Mom can handle it better.' (WPWC2)

However, almost all the fathers pointed out it would also depend on whether the mothers would 'let' them. In the Czech Republic, 13 fathers and 4 mothers claimed that they would have wanted the father to take some leave time if the pay were 100 percent of previous salary, but many of the fathers stated that they would have only wanted to take the leave if they had done so *together* with the mother. This means they would still be helpers rather than the main carers. Thus, it seems that the previous institutional arrangements have influenced thinking so much that even a change in institutional arrangements would not automatically lead to a rapid change.

A possible explanation for the differences between the mothers and fathers comes from the notion of 'maternal gatekeeping,' in which mothers' mother's self-esteem and identity is partially dependent on their role as the sole caregiver (Allen & Hawkins, 1999; Gaunt, 2008). This tendency could be even stronger in post-communist countries because, during the communist era, the family arena had great prestige as the one arena where people could feel that they were free from state control. Consequently, women allegedly felt pride in being in charge of this 'free zone' (for a discussion, see for example, Heitlinger, 1996).

Since respondents had trouble imagining a system that was different from the existing one, they often did not even comprehend that the economic argument against men going on parental leave would disappear if the leave benefits changed to receive 100 percent of their income. One Czech interviewee 'I don't think [the father would have gone on leave] because my income was ridiculously small compared to my husband's, and that is still the case even today' (WBrMC1). Thus, she could not understand that her husband would have also received 100 percent of his income under such a system if he had gone on leave, so it would not have mattered that her income was less than her husband's.

(WBrMC2)

Another highly-educated Czech mother, who works as a tour guide, agreed that if there were no financial constraints and her husband would have wanted to stay at home with the children while she returned to work, 'that would not be a problem.' However, she accepts it as a 'fact' that her husband will be the one in the family to have a career and that it is 'natural,' as men are better than women at 'taking care' of the family economy (WPWC5).

Our interviews give the impression that mothers are more likely to support the notion of separate gender roles than men. For example, a university-educated, Czech father, who works as a librarian, states that he would have wanted to go on parental leave if he had received 100

percent of his income, but also admits that if such benefits were available, he is not sure he would have really stayed at home, since his wife wanted to stay at home (MPMC3).

Even though many fathers think in gender stereotypes by assuming that women are naturally more able to care for children and do the housework, fathers are still much more likely than mothers to support the idea that fathers can go on parental leave, despite the fact that in both countries, fathers represent less than 2% of the parents on parental leave (CSO, 2020; Holubová, 2011). Fathers are especially supportive of fathers going on parental leave when they know some father who has stayed at home on parental leave. One Slovak father, with a secondary education, working in the gastronomy sector, agreed several times in the interview that it was 'natural' for the mother to stay at home with the child during the first three years; yet, when asked if he could imagine going on father leave if no financial restraints existed, he replied:

Yes, I can imagine that, absolutely. I've got a few friends who have done that recently and I like it; it's great. It's obvious that they are satisfied. (MBMC3)

Once again, it shows that attitudes are more likely to change if people have experience of alternatives to the national ideal of care. Nonetheless, given that the number of fathers on parental leave is consistently low in both countries – fathers who are at home with children can hardly be role models for other men.

The case of one Czech father with a doctorate shows that money really matters in taking parental leave. When men usually have higher income from work than women have (the gender pay gap is very high in both countries),² it seems to be a rational decision when a parent with a lower income (typically a mother) stays at home. One father claimed that he actually had planned to go on father leave for a while, but then he realized that the family would have lost too much money. (MPMC1).

Even though he was more open to sharing parental leave times, he was still thinking in terms of threeness concerning the optimal age to send the child to daycare:

... I think it best to stay with the child until he or she turns three years old. If there were no financial constraints, I think we could manage to each spend half of the time at home. (MPMC1).

Even though no strong pattern exists concerning views toward the national ideal of care based on threeness, as almost all respondents share this norm, only university-educated respondents from both countries could imagine fathers staying at home with their children. Thus, it seems that education influences individual attitudes and helps them mediate between culture and practice.

Conclusion

How fruitful is Rush's scheme for explaining fathers going on parental leaves in the Czech and Slovak Republics? His terminology can be helpful in understanding the situation if it is complemented by Kremer's (2007) notion of the national ideal of care. Both the Czech and Slovak Republics have family policies largely based on the concept of what Rush denotes as 'supporting social structures,' as policies are based on supporting social structures around the norm of threeness. According to this national ideal of care, mothers should stay at home until the age of three, and then the children should attend kindergarten full-time,

and the mother should return to full-time work. Meanwhile, fathers should only provide complementary parenting (Rush, 2011) when they are home from work.

However, both countries' policies also somewhat emphasize agency in that to some extent they accept the neo-liberal notion of freedom of choice by making the parental leave officially open to fathers without providing any economic incentives for fathers to actually go on these leaves. Thus, Rush's (2011) notions of parental leaves based on agency and social structures can be useful, but must be further developed when applied to the Czech and Slovak cases.

Our study shows that most parents in both countries tend to rationalize their actual decisions by claiming that they also followed their ideals; and their ideals usually followed the national ideal of care based on the norm of threeness. This indicates that policies do in fact help create norms that are widely shared by the population (cf. Bergqvist & Saxonberg, 2017 for Norway and Sweden).

We also find Seward and Rush's (2016) claim that individual attitudes can act as a mediator between culture and practice to be a fruitful way of analysing the interaction between national ideals of care and the parents' actual decisions, which sometimes deviate from the national ideals. For example, many fathers could imagine going on parental leave if there were no financial losses involved. What can account for this divergence? Sometimes necessity pressures women to return to work before their children turn three, for example, because certain types of professionals fear losing their skills or they feel financial pressures to return to work. Those who have experiences that diverge from the norm of threeness usually have positive experiences. That is those, who felt forced to send their children to daycare before the age of three usually think it was good for their child, which led to a change in their own values. Similarly, those who have indirect experiences with divergent cases – such as knowing fathers who have gone on parental leave, knowing people who sent their children to daycare at an earlier age, or having lived in a foreign country with a different national ideal of care – tend to be less supportive of the norm of threeness.

One of our most interesting findings is that most fathers could imagine going on parental leave if there is no loss of income, while few mothers could imagine such a scenario. Again, we can link this to experience: women are afraid that fathers are not capable of taking care of their children 'properly,' but in countries with 'daddy months,' where almost all fathers go on parental leave such fears are rare. The Nordic examples show that when the state introduces father quotas in the parental leave schemes and they combine them with insurance-based benefits with high replacement rates, most fathers take advantage of this opportunity, and then mothers realize that fathers are indeed capable of taking care of children and therefore, such gendered-biased fears dissipate (e.g. Bergqvist & Saxonberg, 2017). In other words, our study gives some indication that if policymakers introduced a 'Nordic turn' in the policies, it would become much more common for fathers to go on parental leave even in countries with a national ideal of care based on the norm of threeness.

Notes

1. One should keep in mind that some parents used more than one argument, so the total number of arguments was greater than 39

2. For more see Eurostat, 2020. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/sdg_05_20/default/table?lang=en (Accessed: 12 May 2021)

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