Paternity Leave-Taking, Family Dynamics, and Early Children's Behavior in Singapore

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Background

The paternity leave policy was first initiated in Europe in the 1960s to promote gender equality both at home and in the workplace (Rostgaard, 2002). Existing literature in western societies has shown that fathers taking paternity leave and a longer duration of leave are associated with greater fathers' involvement in childcare and housework (Haas & Hwang, 2008; Huerta et al., 2014; Nepomnyaschy & Waldfogel, 2007), increase mothers' marital satisfaction, improve parental and father-child relationships, and reduce the risk of union dissolution (O'Brien, 2009; Petts et al., 2019, 2020; Petts & Knoester, 2019).

However, most current studies examine the correlational rather than causal relationships between paternity leave-taking and family cohesion; and little research connects paternity leave to young children's outcomes, especially in the Asian context. Therefore, this study aims to investigate how paternity leave-taking is causally related to preschool children's behavior and the extent to which family dynamics mediate this relationship in Singapore.

The paternity leave policy in Singapore was first introduced on 1 May 2013, and eligible fathers could take 1-week paid paternity leave and 1-week paid shared parental leave from the mother's 16 weeks of paid maternity leave (MSF, 2013). Since 1 Jan 2017, paid paternity leave has been doubled to 2 weeks, and fathers can take up to 4 weeks of shared parental leave (MOM, 2022).

Data & Methods

Yeung and Li (2022) used the baseline data from the Singapore Longitudinal Early Development Study (SG LEADS) conducted from 2018 to 2019, consisting of 5,005 Singaporean children (citizens and permanent residents) under the age of 7 and their primary caregivers (PCGs) in 3,476 households (Yeung et al, 2020). The analytic sample only includes children (N=3,895) born on or after 1 May 2013, living with two parents, and the PCGs are mothers (about 95% of the PCGs are mothers in SG LEADS). The sample size became smaller (n=2,007) whven examining the impact of paternity leave-taking on children's behavior problems, as the behavioral assessment was only for children aged above 3 years.

The dependent variables were children's behavior problems, consisting of externalizing behavior problems (i.e., irritability, aggression, and hyperactivity) and internalizing behavior problems (i.e., withdrawal, dependency, anxiety, and depression). Composite scores for children's externalizing and internalizing behavior problems indices (i.e., EBPI, IBPI) were used in the analyses, and a higher score indicates more behavior problems. The independent variable was the length of paternity leave (0=did not take leave, 1=1-week leave, 2=2 or more weeks' leave) based on the number of weeks the father took the paid paternity leave when a target child was born. Mediators are family dynamics indicators, including mothers' reports of family conflict, marital satisfaction, father-child closeness, maternal depression, and parenting aggravation.

This study first uses multinomial logistic regression to explore the factors that affect fathers taking paternity leave and for how long. Then, OLS and multinomial logistic regressions are used to examine how paternity leave-taking influences family dynamics as mediators. Finally, Yeung and Li (2022) investigate the relationship between paternity leave-taking and children's behavior problems using OLS regressions. The Karlson-Holm-Breen (KHB) method (Karlson et al., 2012) is adopted to examine how family dynamics mediate the association between paternity leave-taking and children's behavior problems and decompose the mediation percentage for each mediator.

This study also considers that fathers with a stronger fatherhood identity, more egalitarian gender ideology, and more prenatal involvement are more likely to take paternity leave with a longer duration. These fathers also tend to have a greater level of involvement in childcare activities, which in turn, help to reduce children's behavior problems. In order to address the selection issue of fathers' taking paternity leave, propensity score matching (PSM) is used to assess the causal relationships between paternity leave-taking and family dynamics or children's behavioral outcomes. Results from selection models were similar to those presented in OLS models, indicating that the effects of paternity leave-taking on family dynamics and children's behaviors were not due to selection.

Results

Regression results (*see Figure 1*) showed that only taking 2 or more weeks of paternity leave had significant negative relationships with family conflict and parenting aggravation, while it had significant positive associations with marital satisfaction and fathers' involvement in childcare activities. It is also pointed out that taking 2 or more weeks of leave significantly increased the likelihood of having an extremely close father-child relationship. However, paternity leave-taking had no significant effect on maternal depression, and taking a 1-week leave even predicted a significantly higher level of parenting aggravation.

This study then tested whether paternity leave-taking affects preschool children's behavior problems. Both a 1-week and 2 or more weeks of paternity leave were significantly related to children's fewer IBP, while only taking 2 or more weeks of leave was significantly related to children's fewer EBP.
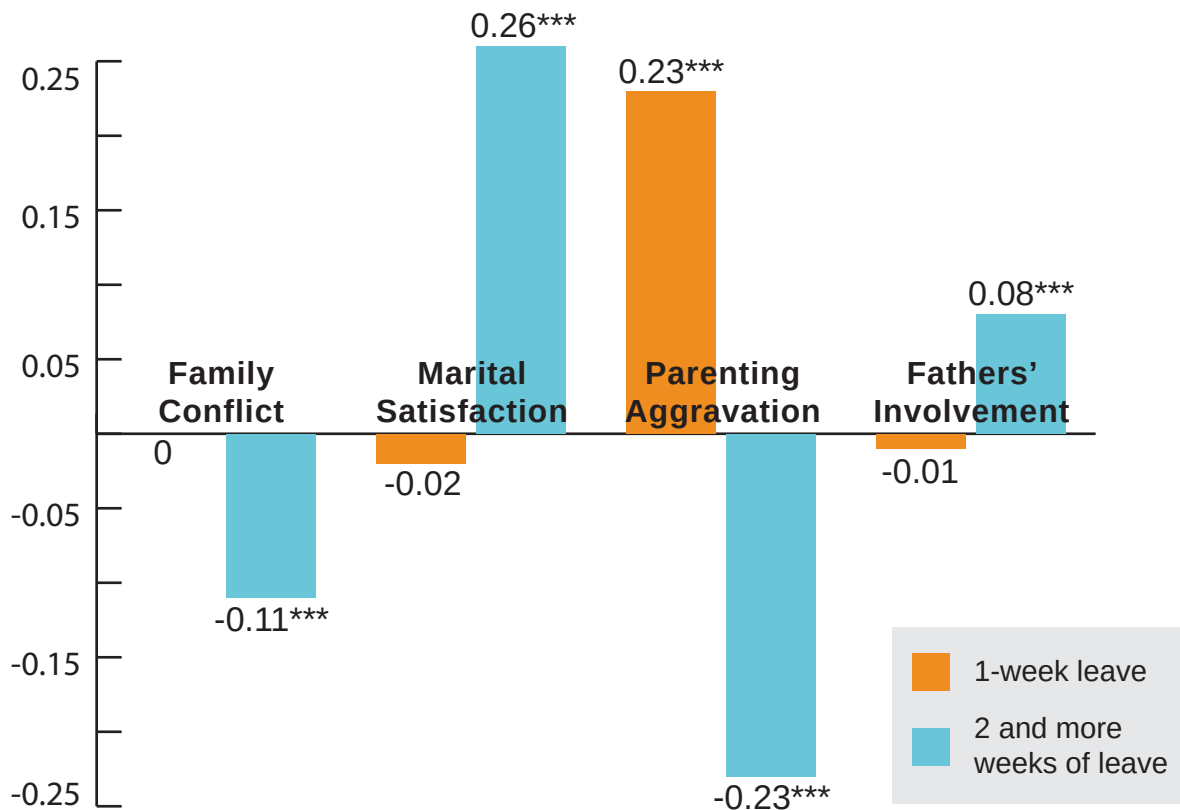
Figure 1. Effect of the length of paternity leave on family dynamics

Results from the KHB analyses confirmed the mediating role of family dynamics. Overall, family dynamics explained 93.38% and 58.15% of the association between taking 2 or more weeks of leave and children's EBP and IBP, respectively. Parenting aggravation (42.48%) and family conflict (26.10%) explained the largest proportions of mediating effects between taking 2 or more weeks of leave and children's EBP, whereas marital satisfaction (21.09%) and maternal depression (12.98%) explained the largest percentages of indirect effects for children's IBP. More detailed results are shown in the original article (Yeung & Li, 2022).

In sum, taking paternity leave, especially 2 or more weeks of leave, enhances family cohesion and decreases mothers' parenting stress, which in turn, reduces preschool children's behavior problems. In other words, taking paternity leave may not directly affect children's social adjustment unless it predicts better family dynamics. As the first empirical study examining the causal relationship between paternity leave-taking and young children's outcomes, Yeung and Li (2022) pointed out that even a 2-week paid paternity leave can enhance family cohesion and promote better children's socio-emotional well-being. Results of this study add an international comparison to the paternity leave literature from an Asian perspective and have policy implications for other Asian societies with shorter or no paternity leave to promote gender equality and boost marriage and fertility rates.

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