Parental Leave: An Important Employee Right, But an Organizational Challenge

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Abstract While parental leave is considered an important right for employees, its application in different work environments is not always straightforward. It is worthwhile to study the implementation in the workplace of the parental leave policy introduced in Québec, especially since this policy has unique characteristics not found anywhere else in North America. We chose to carry out our study in a metropolitan police service. Our results, both quantitative and qualitative, outline significant differences between the perception of all types of parental leave by respondents who have already taken it up and those who have not yet done so. Analysis of these differences brings to light the fact that formal support is not enough: management needs to make sure that employees really feel supported by their work environment when they taking up leave and that they do not feel that they have to pay for it in terms of career opportunities or advancement.

Introduction

Paid parental leave is an important social innovation and a number of countries have developed and adopted innovative parental leave policies over recent years in order to promote work-life balance. In 2006, the Canadian province of Quebec introduced a new parental leave policy, one that is substantially different from those found in the rest of Canada (Tremblay 2010). In addition to maternity leave, it includes a paternity leave that is non-transferable to the mother, as well as a 1 year paid parental leave that can be shared between the parents. This paper focuses on the practical implementation of this parental leave policy in the work environment 5 years after its introduction. If parental leave and

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other family leaves are considered an employee right, the application of these leave policies within various work environments, as shown by earlier research (Blair-Loy and Wharton 2004; Budd and Mumford 2006; Tremblay and Genin 2010), is not always straight forward. It is therefore interesting to study the implementation, in the workplace, of the parental leave policy introduced in Quebec, especially as it is unique in North America. Indeed, this kind of leave is currently found only in Nordic countries such as Norway, Sweden, Denmark or Finland. Other European countries are, however, considering such a change and women in the rest of Canada would like to see similar programs in other Canadian provinces (Tremblay 2009). These elements make the Quebec policy all the more interesting. While studies in Sweden have indicated that Swedish women tend to work part-time more often (Sundström and Duvander 2002), to our knowledge there has been no research on the impact of the longer parental leave *per se*. Since this type of paid parental leave is rather new and studies are scarce, understanding how this leave is used and what, if any, consequences for employees arise from its use, is of interest not only for academics, but also policy makers and human resources professionals.

It is, in general, easier to make use of leave policies in public sector organizations. We therefore chose to carry out our study in a large public sector work environment where the take-up of parental leave would in theory be easier for employees. However, since research has shown that managers and professionals are less satisfied with their work-life balance than other workers (Duxbury *et al.* 1993; Elliott *et al.* 2001; Frederick and Fast 2001; Galinsky *et al.* 2001), we focused on a demanding work environment: the police service. Policing activities are known both for their atypical work schedules and the stress involved.

In this paper, after reviewing the literature on parental leave and organizational support for work-life balance, we present the research sample and the methodology used. Our results, both quantitative and qualitative, outline significant differences between the perception of parental leave by respondents who have previously taken it up and those who have not. The results of the analysis of these differences in perception were extremely interesting and of great importance for organizations who wish to support their employees in parental leave and *in fine*, in achieving work-life balance. The results stressed the fact that formal support is not sufficient: management needs to make sure employees really feel supported within the work environment when taking this leave.

Parental Leave and Organizational Support for Work-Life Balance

Parental Leave

Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) define the work-family conflict as the incompatibility between work and family roles such that one's involvement in the former negatively impacts participation in the latter. Conflicts occur when the individual perceives his/her family roles as being at odds with that of his/her professional role(s) and vice versa (Frone and Rice 1987). A number of studies report that parents complain about work-family conflict, especially parents of young children under 6 years of age (Frederick 1995; Tremblay 2008). Work-family conflict often results from time pressures that parents have to manage (Reid Keene and Quadagno 2004; Smith Major *et al.* 2002; Stephens and Sommer 1996). Family-friendly policies are usually designed to offset or ease the articulation of workers' schedules and responsibilities. Such measures can be implemented at different levels. While in many English-speaking countries and particularly in the USA, the introduction - or not - of family-friendly policies is generally up to the individual employer, most European countries provide

parents with public policies or tools aimed at improving work-life balance (Cette *et al.* 2007), for example low-cost daycare services or paid parental leave.

In this respect, Quebec stands out as an exception in North America since public policies have long supported work-life balance (Cette *et al.* 2007). In January 2006, Québec launched a new parental leave program to promote professional equality among women and men regardless of their employment status. Fertility rate was also a concern and provided another incentive for designing and implementing this program. Women's access to the labour market, children's rights and the participation of men in family responsibilities were also important factors (Doucet *et al.* 2009; Marshall 2008). The program offers maternity leave and allows both parents to benefit from a flexible parental leave that can last up to 1 year, and paying 55% or 75% of the salary depending on which of the two options is chosen (Doucet *et al.* 2009; Tremblay 2009). It also offers a three-week (75% wage replacement) or five-week (55% wage replacement) period of paid paternity leave that is non-transferable to the mother. This non-transferable paternity leave and the possibility to share the parental leave are clearly intended to encourage men to participate fully in parental responsibilities when the children are very young. The presumption is that men would later then participate more in their education (Conseil de la Famille et de l'Enfance 2008; Tanaka and Waldfogel 2007), and that this would further benefit child development in the short and long term (Driessen *et al.* 2005), and work-life balance (Marshall 2008).

Parental leave aims to allow parents to be available to their young children and to resume work without too much difficulty (Doucet *et al.* 2009). The offer of a specific leave for the father, which is non transferable to the mother aims for a stronger participation and presence of fathers, in what some (Brachet 2007) have called the "dual emancipation" model, in reference to the Swedish leave model, which is the first to have reserved time for the father. However, research shows that several organizational and cultural factors contribute to the success or to the failure of family-friendly policies (Fusulier *et al.* 2006) and more specifically of father's participation in paternity and parental leave (Brachet 2007). Research shows that there is a limited impact of unpaid leave policies on leave taking by parents, while, as could be expected, paid-leave policies could have a potential impact -Han and Waldfogel (2003) speak of a potential impact here because the USA do not have a paid parental leave and they could therefore not confirm this impact clearly. However, the Canadian data tends to support this since the introduction of a parental leave has translated into very high participation of parents in leave take-up, but more specifically the introduction of a paid and non-transferable paternity leave for Québec fathers (one province of Canada only has this regime) has translated into an 80% leave take-up by fathers after only 5 years of introduction.

Research also indicates that fathers still limit their participation in terms of number of days of leave taken even in the context of paid leave, and that these days are often taken at the same time as mothers (Brachet 2007). It also indicates that it is very difficult to move fathers from "financial responsibility", as is the case in Germany, Britain and the United States to the model of "caring fatherhood" proposed in Sweden (Hobson 2002), and this is actually difficult even in the Swedish context, as fathers limit their participation. Fathers actually take some 40% of leave days, and often take them at the same time as mothers, thus limiting their implication in childcare (Brachet 2007). While some research identifies factors that have a positive influence on fathers' leave take-up, such as fathers' level of earnings and education in the case of Sweden (Sundström and Duvander 2002), there has not been much research on the organizational variables that also have an impact on leave use. It appears important to determine what factors can explain this sub-optimal leave take-up, especially for fathers, all the more since leave take-up is important for child development (Driessen *et al.* 2005).

While there is data on employment after leave (Han *et al.* 2009), and some on impact of legislation on leave taking (Han and Waldfogel 2003), there is little research and no national data on organizational support to leave take-up. Haas *et al.* (2002) indicate, on the basis of a Swedish survey that while Swedish companies are rather "father-friendly", few of them have actually undergone important changes in corporate policy or practice in order to make the work environment more supportive of active fatherhood. In such a context, men's use of parental and family leave benefits remains limited, even in Sweden, where the State is most supportive of this (Brachet 2007; Haas *et al.* 2002).

It appears that in the absence of organizational support, taking up leave or using other family-friendly policies can not only be difficult, but can sometimes be perceived as having a negative impact on one's career (Fusulier *et al.* 2008; Whitehouse *et al.* 2007). The expected benefits of these policies are then significantly overvalued when organizational support is not provided; it is thus important to determine what elements of organizational support could be missing for a better implementation of parental leave.

Organizational Support

This section discusses the importance of organizational support to the success of family friendly policies. Employees working in an environment viewed as offering family support experience lower levels of work-family conflict, which then translates into greater job and family satisfaction, followed by greater overall life satisfaction (Lapierre *et al.* 2008). The existence of family-friendly policies, such as parental leave, is supposed to reduce work-family conflict; however, research has identified various factors that are likely to affect the relationship between family-friendly policies and work-life balance (Hammer *et al.* 2009; Kossek and Ozeki 1998). The analysis by Whitehouse *et al.* (2007) of the Australian parental leave program shows that its take-up is primarily influenced by fathers' employment characteristics: those working in small organizations or non-permanent positions are least likely to use parental or paternity leave. This analysis highlights barriers to usage associated with labour market divisions and career pressures that cannot be solved solely by the introduction of progressive leave policies. Fathers' level of earnings and education can also have an impact on leave take-up (Sundström and Duvander 2002).

Other researchers draw attention to the impact of organizational culture and the behaviour and attitude of colleagues and supervisors on the problems encountered in articulating professional and personal responsibilities and leave take-up (Haas *et al.* 2002; Lewis 2001). Guérin *et al.* (1997) observed that organizational culture bears on the intensity of work-family conflict: when the employee does not feel that he/she will suffer penalties because of family matters, he/she is less likely to experience work-family conflict. Conflict is also lessened when the employee believes that the manager feels empathy or is accepting of arrangements facilitating work-life balance. Campbell Clark (2001) shows that organizational culture and management's acceptance of measures supporting work-life balance help explain why they are or are not actually used by employees. And finally, findings reported by Behson (2005) and by Thompson *et al.* (1999) underline that family-friendly policies are often inefficient when informal support is not provided in the form of a positive attitude from management and an inspiring work environment, where employees need not fear for their career advancement if they make use of these policies.

It therefore seems that while much research insists on the existence or availability of family-friendly policies (Duxbury and Higgins 2003), organizational support may play a positive or negative role in the actual use of these policies (Blair-Loy and Wharton 2004; Budd and Mumford 2006), including the parental leave policy (Fusulier *et al.* 2006;

Fusulier *et al.* 2008). Although parental leave is a public policy in Quebec, the use of this measure varies from one organization to the next and depends on the perceptions of the employees and the anticipated consequences on their career (Tremblay and Genin 2010; Whitehouse *et al.* 2007). The employer's support therefore appears to be an essential ingredient in the success of parental leave policies. Indeed, perceived organizational support toward parental leave is likely to encourage, discourage or even deter employees from using those policies. In other words, for these policies to fulfill their objectives, employed parents need to be confident in their use of the policies and without fear of consequences on their careers. As a result, it is important to study in-depth the implementation of parental leave policies in the workplace, their perception by employees and the possible consequences of their take-up.

Methodology

Our research aim is to answer the following questions: What is the perception of Quebec's parental leave program in the workplace; and what facilitates or hinders its usage? These questions are dealt with comprehensively. We opted for a case study methodology because it is particularly appropriate in instances where the purpose is to study a phenomenon in depth or where the contextual conditions are believed to be pertinent to understanding it (Yin 2003). In this research, context was fundamental to examine in order to get the interactions between variables liable to facilitate or hinder the use of the parental leave program. The case we present is based on qualitative and quantitative methods. First the general results of a quantitative survey are examined. Then, a qualitative approach with in-depth interviews is used to gain a more detailed understanding of the situation. The survey was carried out in 2007–8 amongst the members of a metropolitan police service in Québec (Canada); it was done with the cooperation of the human resources management department.

The Police Service's Working Environment

The following description of the sample relies on prior research (Vallière and Lavoie 2006) carried out at the same police service. The police working environment is not generally thought of as a job environment that would actually encourage or promote work-life balance. It is stressful, with important professional risks and atypical work schedules. The police service is traditionally a male environment; yet one of the significant trends in many police organizations is the feminization of a large segment of the workforce over the last 20 years. In the police service (PS) we studied, women represented about 28% of the police officers in 2006, a 6% increase from 2001 (Vallière and Lavoie 2006). As the civilian workforce has long been feminized, in 2006, 36% of the total police workforce were women (Vallière and Lavoie 2006). Another important trend is the rejuvenation of the work force. In 2006, 65% of the employees were born after 1965. Both trends – feminization and rejuvenation - contribute to the rise of new issues and expectations within police forces, especially with respect to work-life balance. Younger generations seem to have a greater desire for work-life balance, even at the expense of their career expectations, than older generations (Labrèche and Lavoie 2004). They are also more open to role sharing between men and women, including taking-up parental leave. In recent years, the HR department noted an increase in maternity leave, in paternity leave and in parental leave in general. They expect this increase to continue in the coming years (Vallière and Lavoie 2006).

Family concerns are among the most important issues for police employees. A survey carried out in 2005 indicates that 61% declared that planning their career is conditioned by work-life balance. While 35% declared facing work-family conflict - this number rises to 40% among police officers - according to Lavoie (2005), almost two thirds of police employees believe that their supervisors support them in work-life balance efforts or approach. So, within the context of the significant advances that have been made, it is interesting to see how parental leave is perceived.

Research Tools and Sample Description

Our research methodology includes two parts: one quantitative, providing a general outline; and one qualitative, going more in-depth into the perceptions of the parental leave program, its effects and what may facilitate or hinder its usage.

Questionnaires for the quantitative survey were administered online for the most part, but also by mail. They included questions on (i) work-family conflict in general, (ii) organizational support for work-life balance, (iii) the perception of the different types of parental leave, (iv) the support provided by colleagues and supervisors and on (v) the impact on one's career if one uses parental leave. For most questions we used Likert's scales in 4 or 5 points. Questions and categories for analysis (leave take-up, timing, motives, organizational support and legitimacy of leave) were inspired by prior research, generally on family-friendly measures within firms within firms, which we extend to parental leave specifically (Families and Work Institute 1998, 2008; Guérin *et al.* 1997). The questionnaire was e-mailed to all members of the PS, however we were informed by the HR department that not all employees use their professional email. It is therefore likely that quite a large number of employees did not even receive the message. Despite this, we retrieved 200 completed questionnaires, 104 from men and 96 from women. Women were therefore overrepresented in our survey (they account for only 36% of the workforce); nevertheless, the response rate for men is satisfactory for an issue that is not usually considered of prime concern to them and for which it is often difficult to obtain their participation. The questionnaire was also submitted to administrative employees, the majority of whom are women, as this category of workers also has atypical work schedules and a stressful work environment despite the fact that they are not police officers.

As Table 1 shows, women are more often found in administrative and support functions, while men dominate the top hierarchical functions. The differences are statistically significant (chi-squared test). The majority (56%) of respondents have parental responsibilities. 57% of women and 55% of men have at least one child under the age of 18. The respondents were therefore, in general, concerned by work-life balance issues. In the light of the of ageing population, one can also surmise that non-parents may well have family responsibilities toward an ageing, sick or handicapped spouse or family member. In

Table 1 Professional categories by gender.	Job title	Men	Women	Total
	Administrative role	8 (8%)	36 (38%)	44 (22%)
	Police officer	71 (68%)	51 (53%)	122 (61%)
	Supervisor, manager	17 (16%)	9 (9%)	26 (13%)
	Commander, lieutenant,	8 (8%)	0 (0%)	8 (4%)
	Total	104 (100%)	96 (100%)	200 (100%)

addition, in the context of blended families, respondents may have responsibilities towards a spouse's child or children and may therefore be directly concerned with these issues as well. In order to assess the formal or informal support of the work environment, we evaluated the perception of parental leave according to the following categories: men and women, parents and non-parents and persons who used the leave and those who had not.

To complete the survey with qualitative data on actual use of parental leave, in-depth interviews were also conducted. Qualitative data of this type provides a better understanding of the challenges posed by the actual use of employee rights, such as the take-up of parental leave. The categories for analysis (leave take-up, timing, motives, organizational support and legitimacy of leave) were developed on the basis of previous research cited above, but also here on the main question that came out of the quantitative data, that is the observation of a difference of perception between those who had taken the leave and those who had not, and the need to explain this difference as well as the possible impact in terms of leave take-up more generally.

Qualitative data was therefore gathered from 53 semi-structured 60-minute interviews with police service employees. Interviews were conducted individually and confidentially. Our sample was made of 28 women - of which 20 were policewomen, 3 supervisors or sergeant, 2 managers, and the others office workers - and 26 men - of which 16 were policemen and the others commanders, supervisor or chief of division. Respondents were aged between 26 and 55. Although their seniority in the service varied, most respondents entered the service directly. Our intent was to review as many personal and family situations as the participants would allow, gathering as much data as possible and saturating the corpus. Among the employees interviewed, the following situations were observed: some had children, some were childless, and others had family responsibilities toward parents or an ailing spouse. With regards to the children, ages ranged from newborn to young adult. Among the respondents with children under 18, a number had shared custody or lived with their spouse's children. All the interviews were recorded, transcribed and processed using the Nvivo8 program to sort and aggregate the information.

Data was coded into the following categories (Fusulier *et al.* 2006; Guérin *et al.* 1997; Haas *et al.* 2002) in order to sort it: work hours and schedules, work-family conflict, work-life balance; organizational support for work-life balance (from supervisors and colleagues); distribution of tasks within the household; support from partner; access to family-friendly policies; access to parental leave; perception of parental leave; provisions claimed by respondent; positive and negative effects of parental leave and impact on career. The coding was validated by two researchers.

Results

Although the environment was not particularly suited to work-life balance, the police service under study initially seemed relatively open to parental leave. Following in-depth analysis, however, we encounter discrepancies in the attitudes of employees toward parental leave. There is a real difference between stated policy and the personal experience of parents who have taken up parental leave. In this paper, we argue that focus should be put on organizational support in order to increase leave uptake. In order to support this, we present the statistical results of our research but we focus on the qualitative results that provide a better understanding of the perceptions of parental leave in the workplace, its impact, as well as difficulties related to leave uptake.

An Open Attitude Toward Parental Leave

Where parental leave is concerned, respondents are very positive: 94% believe that "*taking parental leave is a right*" and approximately 65% agree with the statement that "*taking parental leave is part of the workplace culture*". Our results therefore show the police working environment is, at least initially, rather favourable to parental leave take-up. This is somewhat surprising in a male-dominated sector. Indeed, one police officer told us:

> "You actually do not have a choice, you must spend time with your children whether you are a mother or a father; one of the two has to be there for them. I recently met a plainclothes officer who was back from a 6 week parental leave; his wife took on part of the program and he pitched in too so I see that sharing is slowly gaining ground. When you have two young children, or even toddlers, things are hectic and there is no idle time in the house. But we managed to make sure that one of the parents is home at all times and with the parental leave this is possible. It sure is a good thing that both parents can get involved that much more."

This positive view of the situation is underscored by the fact that only 6% of respondents disagree with the statement that "*taking parental leave is a right*". What's more, there are no significant differences (chi-squared test) between women and men or between parents and non-parents in this regard. This small percentage of respondents who disagree seems to represent a small group of sceptics, with no particular characteristic in terms of gender or parenthood. Again, with regards to the approximately 65% of respondents that agree with the statement: "*taking parental leave is part of the workplace culture*", we found no statistically significant differences between women and men; nor between parents and non-parents.

The question "*If I am (or I become) a manager, taking parental leave is rather unlikely*", enables us to assess the general view in the workplace with regards to parental leave take-up and career development. Overall only 22% of respondents agree or fully agree with this statement which means that the majority does not believe that there is inconsistency between management functions and leave take-up. One respondent emphasized that, compared to previous generations, this behaviour represents a major shift. Indeed, older policemen generally had a wife at home, whereas those from the younger generation have partners who are active in the labour market and this influences their behaviour:

> "There is a definite difference between generations, say between the tail end of baby boomers and the younger generation now in middle management; they will take complete parental leave even when they have just been promoted. There are improvements in the governmental measures that are offered and even if we are appalled that the younger generation of middle managers take leave when they have just been promoted, well it's the law and if it's the law it's certainly possible to do so: they have the right."

To sum up, contrary to expectations that the police working environment would not be favourable to work-life balance, it actually appears to be open to parental leave take-up. In addition, from a point of view of organizational culture, the perception of parental leave is generally positive; it is relatively open to people taking the leave. However, attitudes toward

parental leave display more ambivalence than expected in practice, and this is highlighted by those who have taken parental leave and have a different view.

Those Who Have Taken Parental Leave Have a Less Positive Perception of the Situation

Organizational culture is a significant element in fostering or dissuading work-life balance arrangements. The survey findings indicate that the majority of respondents believe it is usually possible to find a solution and to take parental leave. However, the data points to a substantial difference between parents and non-parents. Indeed, we find 74% of non-parents but only 57% of parents agreed with the statement "*Taking parental leave is part of the workplace culture*". Non-parents think that taking parental leave is part of the organizational culture, but it is probably because they never had to file such a request. So, while workplace philosophy is apparently not unfavourable to parental leave, parents have a different, less positive view of the situation. Where persons with parental leave experience are concerned, opinions are fairly evenly distributed with regard to the statement *"Taking parental leave is part of the workplace culture*. Figures show that 22% totally disagree with the statement and only 9% totally agree. Among respondents who have not experienced parental leave, results are more definite: 69% agree with the statement (including 18% who are in total agreement). It is clear then that employees who have experienced parental leave hold a less positive perception of organizational culture in this respect, while the respondents who have never experienced parental leave, perceive the workplace culture as being very favourable to its take-up.

    Among the respondents who had never used parental leave, 88% agree with the statement "*If I were to take parental leave, I could find a way to miss work*". This proportion, however, drops to 68% among respondents who have already experienced parental leave (see Table 2). Still, since the majority of respondents agree with the statement, it means that it is possible in most cases to work things out in order to take-up parental leave. The difference between the two groups is underlined by the fact that respondents who have experienced parental leave

Table 2 Taking up parental leave.

"I can find a way to miss work to take up parental leave"	No previous leave taken	Previous leave taken	Total
Totally disagree	6 (4%)	3 (7%)	9 (5%)
Disagree	13 (9%)	11 (25%)	24 (13%)
Agree	87 (63%)	23 (52%)	110 (60%)
Agree totally	32 (23%)	7 (16%)	39 (21%)
Total	138 (100%)	44 (100%)	182 (100%)
"I have my supervisor's support to take up parental leave"	No previous leave taken	Previous leave taken	Total
Totally disagree	2 (2%)	3 (7%)	5 (3%)
Disagree	10 (7%)	16 (36%)	26 (14%)
Agree	91 (66%)	20 (46%)	111 (61%)
Agree totally	34 (25%)	5 (11%)	39 (22%)
Total	137 (100%)	44 (100%)	181 (100%)

offer less convincing or cut and dry answers: they see or have experienced the organizational problems entailed in taking up parental leave.

"When someone is missing, adjustments must be made, for example staying longer or something, but somebody must be present at all times; management has never accepted training people to manage the turnover while waiting for another person to arrive… We have to fill-in for each other; if someone calls in sick, we must make it to work regardless of the weather conditions, time of day, or whatever. I remember having to report in at 3 AM with a knee injury; I did, then I went to see my doctor who put me off work for 10 days because I could hardly walk."

Differences are even more marked when supervisor support is considered (see Table 2). More than 91% of respondents who have not taken parental leave believe that they would have the support of their supervisor. While only 57% of persons who have taken up parental leave state that they received supervisor support, and 43% witness to the contrary – this is a rather high percentage. Only 9% of respondents who have no experience of parental leave believe that their supervisor would not support them. These differences in the perception of organizational support toward parental leave are significant, and one must add discrepancies in individual supervisors' attitude to them. Interviewing both male and female police officers, we observed that while some have a positive opinion of their supervisors' support, others qualified this support as something resulting from individual behaviour more than an organizational commitment to and support for work-life balance:

"It's different between one station and the other. Here, it is the sergeant who decides of group composition; if your supervisor is open-minded, things will go well in group composition –he's the one who decides. But whenever you happen to deal with a sergeant who says: *It's your problem and we're not concerned*, things will be more difficult. It's a matter of openness."

"My supervisors always told me: *Your family comes first and we'll manage*. It's also my view of things."

"Management doesn't accept to train others for this task and we are backups to each other. There are only seven of us able to do this job. Each day four of us work and the three others are off. If one person is unable to report to work, then the others must manage to compensate. There is no support available from anyone else. I can't just walk in and tell my boss that I have to go; he'll just reply: *find someone to replace you*."

"When my spouse took parental leave for our second son […] he left for 8 weeks because he added his vacation to the parental leave, something you can never do in other circumstances. His boss, however, didn't really appreciate it because he is a motorcycle officer. He isn't part of a team, it is different altogether."

It is clear from these results that although the organization is to a certain extent "father-friendly", it has not undertaken major changes in its policies or practices to ensure that the work environment really supports parents who take leave.

Where colleague support is concerned, the discrepancies are not as sharp. Nearly 85% of respondents with no parental leave experience think that they would have their colleagues' support, but only 61% of persons who have experienced parental leave confirm receiving actual support from their colleagues. It is worth noting that differences between the groups were more marked at both ends of the spectrum: more than one quarter of respondents who had not experienced parental leave were in full agreement with the statement "*I have my*

colleagues' support" while just 7% of persons who have taken parental leave fully agreed with the statement. The actual support provided seems less than the anticipated or expected cooperation. Some supervisors and colleagues may be supportive and amicable while others much less so and that this may be somewhat random:

> "There may be tensions between us at times but we know we're all in the same difficult situation, there is no back-up […] I suggested that management begin by asking who would accept to work a few shifts; things would be easier somehow if people agreed earlier instead of having full days dumped on them. We do it on a small scale but it's not easy."

> "Yes, the situation generates conflicts among us… at times there are time conflicts and I can't attend my classes –I go to work instead; I go to work because of the personnel shortage… "

The perception of the impact of parental leave on career is extremely significant. While, more than 62% of respondents agree with the statement "*There is no negative impact on my career*", but there are stark differences between respondents who have previously taken parental leave and those who have not. A large number of the former disagree with the statement as only 29% say that there is no negative impact on one's career while 71% of respondents without parental leave experience believe this – the proportions are inversed. It means that three out of four respondents who have experienced parental leave believe that parental leave may have or has had negative impacts on their career.

From the survey results, it would appear that as long as respondents have not been exposed to the actual conditions and problems related to parental leave, especially with respect to career management, they cannot imagine the problems involved. In spite of the fact that the workplace is considered receptive to parental leave take-up, our findings reveal that employees who have taken parental leave firmly believe that there is a price to pay in terms of career development. Challenges arise with the actual take-up of leave and may lead individuals, who are not in principle opposed to parental leave, to be somewhat less supportive than they might have been otherwise.

Obstacles to Parental Leave Take-Up

Some organizational policies, such as the non-replacement of officers on parental leave, indirectly influence the organizational culture regarding parental leave and can generate conflicts. Respondents mention problems inherent to the (small) size of certain units or teams; namely with respect to the difficulty involved in the covering for absent team members. From this point of view, all leave, regardless of its nature, generates a strain on the team; it may lead to fathers, who want to take parental leave, feeling less legitimate in their request. During the interviews, three male police officers mentioned the problems they had in taking parental leave because of the small size of their unit and the strain on the other members of the team who had to bear the extra workload:

> "When someone is gone, it's not a matter of children or what have you; that is quite irrelevant. What happens is that the service continues to assign projects for this and for that, and we find ourselves with minimum staffing while the person on leave is not replaced […] Here, the minimum daytime staffing is a team of two and a single officer, same thing at night but that's written nowhere. You ask your boss for time off and it's impossible."

"Because we are already staffed at minimum levels, the guy who needs leave for one reason or another cannot obtain it because there's nobody to fill-in for him. He must attend work and this is what is going to cause problems in his family. The sergeant needs at least four police officers so if one of them takes leave, it's not that bad … but it is difficult to work with reduced staff because the volume of incoming calls remains the same."

"In these circumstances we can't provide the population with the best service because some of the calls are not dealt with within a reasonable time. We are all asked to cover events like jazz festivals, but we aren't replaced, so if somebody wants to take leave, you can't unless you're really sick."

Another respondent told us that the whole issue is a real organizational challenge and that it is only in the units where police officers are older that the organizational problems related to parenting are easily dealt with:

"In my unit and in the police service in general parental leave is an issue because it is available now and things happen that were unheard of 10 years ago. It becomes an organizational problem. In order to replace those who take-up parental leave, you need to have a resource at hand and it frequently entails a certain amount of organizational stress. For example in the cavalry patrol, police officers are older and most of their children are grown ups. In the X unit I don't think there are young children; in the last year there weren't any births."

"When fathers take their parental leave they aren't replaced and their co-workers are left with extra workload simply because there are fewer personnel on the patrol. Not even for maternal leave at that. Women take leave from work and, for example in Station X, there are a lot of women between 25 and 30 years of age. They'll want to have children and right now ten of them have children."

These results show that the PS does not deter parents from taking parental leave but it did not adapt its organization and practices to this leave, which creates problems for the other employees, and may finally be an obstacle to parental leave take-up.

The specialization required for certain jobs in part explains the problems with backup and the resulting organizational strains:

"In units where specialized work is the rule, squads for example, personnel replacement is extremely difficult. You can't really replace this type of policeman because of the specialization involved. The same goes for someone working in forensic identification… but for the patrol personnel whose work is of a more general nature, things are different. Yes it's a complex issue."

Other results reinforce the idea that the PS did not adapt its organization to the new parental leave. The situation appears even to push a number of fathers to shorten the duration of their parental leave, but inherent organizational difficulties are not the only source of such problems. Rules, such as those regarding the earning of vacation days, force fathers to split the parental leave in order to preserve their vacation entitlement:

"Yes, I took three weeks instead of five; there are indeed advantages and drawbacks to parental leave. You lose some annual vacation days for the time you have taken in parental leave. It doesn't pay to take the parental leave in its entirety if you lose vacation days. But there are two weeks I can take later if I want and I'm happy I did; you receive only 70% of your salary but that's ok, it's still worth it."

To sum up, the interviews highlight the fact that, despite the apparently open and supportive attitude of the work environment, when it comes down to implementing the leave policy, there are organizational difficulties that make colleagues and superiors less open to leave take-up, although they recognize that it is a legal right. From a theoretical point of view, colleagues and managers agree with the parental leave policy but when it comes to practical implication, the organization is not necessarily adapted to it. Moreover, some organizational policies, such as the non-replacement of officers on parental leave, may indirectly impact supervisors and colleagues' support for taking up parental leave; they are likely to end up with work overload when a colleague takes such a leave.

Parental Leave Take-Up Timing and Motives

There were discussions, among the supervisors and colleagues of those on leave, about the problems created by the many fathers who take their parental leave in the summer rather than at the time of the child's birth. This shows that, despite support for the principle of parental leave, the timing of the leave leads to debate and sometimes lower levels of approval for the leave:

> "Now if you ask the manager in me, I'd say that when fathers take their paternity leave in July when a large number of us are on vacation and our services are most required, the whole thing becomes a major issue and a real challenge. In addition to vacation and all the requests and calls we must deal with, summer activity levels and major events, you must subtract parental leave for which no replacement is available. When a father takes his paternity leave, he isn't replaced… They have the right to take 1 month and they take it but they add it to their summer vacation."

The Christmas period also seems to be a problem for supervisors and co-workers because many fathers choose this period to take their paternity leave:

> "He's going to take it (paternity leave) right in the middle of the holiday season. Of course it will bring frustration to many even though replacement personnel are available. I told my husband to take it in December; I give birth in November and for 5 weeks I'll be off, for the duration of family gatherings… Everybody takes their parental leave at the same time either in June or December and it is legal. There is a shortage of personnel; others can't take time off because those on parental leave are not replaced. This generates a lot of tension because police officers are a scarce resource. And yes, asking for time off creates tension, regardless of the reason for asking."

The practice of taking paternity leave at a time of one's choosing and to extend the vacation period comes under criticism because the parental leave is not taken at the time the child is born. One might ask what kind of support was made available to the mother at that time. This practice actually goes against one of the objectives of the program, i.e., to ensure the father's presence in the first days or weeks after birth and to foster fathers' involvement with their newborn. A number of fathers and co-workers echoed this:

> "I'm not sure if I'll take time off 3 weeks or for a shorter period of time. In my team I'm not the oldest so I have no choice for my vacation. I don't think paternity leave is designed to be taken in the summer so I'll take my leave when my wife gives birth and that's not in 8 months but I'll be there when the newborn comes."

However, opinions on this topic varied. As one mothers expressed her satisfaction at her husband's decision to take his paternity leave in the summer instead of at the time of the child's birth. Interestingly enough, this was not to be more present for the newborn, but rather to take care of the older children. Again there seems to be a deviation from the objectives of the paternity leave which was designed to help the mother and to foster contact between father and newborn. The following excerpt from an interview confirms this:

> "My husband, also a police officer, took all 5 weeks and really enjoyed the leave. He took the entire month of August. He was very happy and that was great; he appreciated the leave and so did I. It was as if we were on vacation. He felt relaxed; our older son could spend more time with his father and did not feel excluded in the process. At that time the baby was 6 months old and anyway, in the very beginning the baby needs his mother more… that was enjoyable."

With the above objective in mind, parental leave also allows fathers to realize how tiring it is to take care of a newborn… Some just can't wait to get back to work!

> "I didn't mind coming back to work either. The wife at home with the child has her husband handy and this is good for the couple. The parental leave program is a positive opportunity, depending on the salary of both parents. It really changes one's life and when you come back to work you're tired but the employer is able to understand because seven straight nights with a newborn in the house isn't all that easy… I'll be leaving for my vacation soon and I'm really looking forward to that."

From the point of view of female respondents, maternity leave take-up and parental leave overall generates fewer questions from both the women involved and their colleagues:

> "I didn't need to negotiate much to take this leave, really. You can take a year extra if you want for a total of 2 years leave but 1 year is at your expense then. You have the right, whatever they say. When I'm at home I'm not a cop, I go on maternity leave and goodbye! I'm with my baby… and you know, I'm not bored at home and I don't miss work. I have friends among police officers and I see my friends. But don't expect me to come to the police station just to keep in touch, no, I'm not a workaholic, police business runs with or without me."

It is worth noting, however, that a number of women reported negative attitudes from colleagues especially if they were new in the service or when two pregnancies occurred with only a short interval between them:

> "Some think that I became pregnant rather quickly but I had worked 1 1/2 year elsewhere and I had been with the police for 3 years, so I didn't feel I was a completely green. Some didn't appreciate it but it didn't overly affect me."

With regards to successive maternity leaves and even parental leave, extended leave seemed to generate problems or at least some misunderstandings. In other words, not only the timing of leave, but also its length, can lead to less supportive attitudes, not to mention potential negative effects on the career:

> "I was on maternity leave and then I switched to parental leave. Here in our collective agreement it is possible to take up to 2 years off if you include all leaves and the unpaid leave… during my parental leave my other daughter was diagnosed with cancer; at the time I was expected to come back to work she was under chemotherapy and management refused to extend my leave. I appealed to our union for help."

Is Parental Leave More Legitimate than Other Leaves?

Another surprising attitude revealed by the research data is that parental leaves are often perceived as more legitimate than other forms of leave (when a child is older, for example), even if they are for family reasons. This may be because it is generally believed that caring for a newborn is essential. We cannot therefore deduce that an environment that is found in our study to be positive for parental leave would be supportive for other types of working time arrangements required or requested for work-life balance (i.e., flexible schedule, leave for family purposes, reduced workweek, voluntary part-time, etc.). In fact, quantitative and qualitative data indicated that taking up other types of leave is often seen negatively:

> "We have a bank for sick leave but I remember when I started to work in the service, sick leave was already frowned upon. Sometimes you have to, you have the right, but other reasons are frowned upon as well. There is also burnout or depression, that too is frowned upon. Right now in my workplace there are more people with children and I can see more people taking time off for family reasons; it seems more acceptable."

> "But the most revealing test is when your supervisor tells you: *you daughter has leukemia but that's not my problem*. I think this tells all. At one point I was ready to hire a lawyer. Once a physiotherapy appointment had been changed and I found that message in my answering machine; I was stuck because I didn't have enough time to take her there and come back during my break: permission was denied."

> "All this is a juggling act. We try not to take sick leave and to make arrangements with the supervisor and to find somebody to fill-in. Of course I can anticipate, meaning that I'll owe time to the service, I'll have to report in on another day. I don't understand that system… I'm one who isn't scared to take sick leave when necessary and I remember police officers – male and female telling me: *I don't feel well*. Why don't you just go home? *Oh no*, they reply, *I can't take sick leave*. This isn't unusual. If my mother was sick, no trouble, this is part of the collective agreement; we have 60 hours, which is 7 days, half of which must always remain in the hours bank."

Many respondents mentioned needing to find a colleague who would cooperate in order to be able to make arrangements for work schedules, vacation, exchanging hours, or getting organized to replace someone:

> "Well, here we anticipate time and pay it back later. We must fill a form and hand it to the supervisor. I can anticipate one, two, and up to 7 1/2 hours. When the sheet adds up to 7 1/2 hours, you owe 1 day of work. Then they can ask you to come in at a date of their choosing unless you draw on your personal leave and pay back your debt before the assignment is given to you. If you anticipate less than 7 1/2 hours, then they can't ask you to repay the time. This way, you may have up to 4 anticipated hours (laughter)."

> "Yes, I did that recently and then I had to work on one of my days off. You can check this out in the computer, how many hours of planned days off, how many are available."

> "For part-timers, the taking up of leave hasn't occurred yet. They have a right to it but nobody has used it so far. When the person is back from her maternity leave, and if there is someone else in the same situation who wishes to share schedules, yes it's possible but to my knowledge this has yet to occur. In our department, however, we are on minimum staffing and this is harder to arrange unless two persons decide they have no problem with a decrease in their salary; yes they can team up to organize

work-family arrangements between themselves. But we'll have to adjust and do something in the coming years."

The need for adopting a "give-and-take" attitude is also mentioned. The understanding was that if one gave generously to the service, one might gain more flexibility; but this was apparently not as automatic and legitimate as parental leave.

"I'm a person who'll give a lot to the service in terms of hours so when I must take leave I don't feel that I'm frowned upon. I don't ask for leave very often; I'm lucky to have parents who are still young and healthy so except for dentist appointments I will not seek or request time off. I'm lucky enough not to owe anybody anything."

"Occasionally in situations where weather or family obligations require that you stay home, some things can be managed from the home while still working for the service. There are tools that help in managing work-family issues."

While a number of respondents expressed feeling negative pressure with regards to leave for family reasons, others simply stated that they have a right to take leave:

"Last week my son didn't feel well, I drew on family leave and stayed home to take care of him. At the daycare centre, there's too much action, my children are often sick with an "-itis" […] I have the right to take 60 h of family leave and at the end of the year, there is rarely any left in the bank. My kids don't want their grandmother; they want their mom when they are ill. I'll never feel any shame for taking family leave as needed, they can even check on me if they wish."

Supervisors who had children or who used to have children at home were apparently more open to the various leave formulas and work schedule arrangements:

"I have children and I can understand this quite well. It's like anything else; if you haven't experienced something you may have an idea of it but you don't know exactly what it's all about… Things are very different from what they were just one generation ago. Today, more men take care of their children, for example during paternity leave. When I had my children, those things simply didn't exist. Increasingly people take advantage of this in every part of society; and in general, fathers do take care of their children."

Discussion

The perception of employees with regards to their right to take up parental leave is an important issue from the standpoint of work-life balance and career management. Contrary to expectations that the police work environment would not foster work-life balance, our findings lead us to believe that it is, at least initially, fairly open to parental leave. This compares quite well to what Haas *et al.* (2002) observed for Sweden some time after the introduction and extension of parental leave, a situation similar to that of Quebec, that is that the organization is somewhat "father friendly". While the expansion of the length of leave in Canada did translate into longer leaves in organizations, as shown by Han *et al.* (2009) for the United States, the Canadian case indicates that a better financing increases leave uptake, but we show that there are still obstacles to leave take-up even in this context. Given the fact that the police sector is a sector where wages are quite high in comparison with the average, our study also confirms that higher earnings and level of education

(college level and often university degree) has a positive impact on leave take-up, although we cannot directly compare with other sectors here (Whitehouse *et al.* 2007), and no Canadian data would permit this comparison on a larger scale.

Our results also highlight important differences in perceptions of leave take-up between the groups of respondents that were interviewed as well as the fact that respondents insisted the organizational openness was strongly contingent upon individual, first-line supervisors. These findings are in line with those of Behson (2005) and confirm the importance of informal or organizational support (supervisors and colleagues) to the success of the implementation of family-friendly policies. Indeed, we found that some respondents chose to remain in a specific department or service because things were more difficult elsewhere. As was found in previous research (Haas *et al.* 2002; Lewis 2001; Tremblay and Genin 2010), our respondents were also very aware of the value of informal support. They perceived that the support displayed in their work environment was provided by the immediate work environment, and then translated into workplace culture, which confirm and complement past studies (Guérin *et al.* 1997).

We observed the same as Haas *et al.* (2002) for Sweden: although the organization is somewhat "family-friendly", it has not undertaken major changes in its practices to ensure that the work environment is really supportive of parents who take leave. As Sweden and Quebec are amongst the most progressive countries in terms of paid parental and paternity leave, this says a lot for the situation in other countries. While leave may be supported officially in a country, the absence of paid leave is a factor that impacts negatively on leave take-up (Han and Waldfogel 2003); beyond this however, even when leave is officially supported and paid, there appear to be obstacles to leave take-up.

While Behson (2005) has shown the importance of informal support for work-family measures (working hours, schedules, etc.) in a firm, we show that it also plays a role even for formal State policy measures such as parental leave, which are considered "normal" and can be "part of the organizational culture", as was shown here, but can still be perceived as having negative impacts on one's career and therefore, lead to lower take-up. Where our study may have gone a little further than previous research in Sweden (Brachet 2007; Haas *et al.* 2002; Sundström and Duvander 2002), where leaves are comparable to Quebec, is in showing precisely how these obstacles can take various insidious forms, the qualitative part of the research making it possible to uncover such subtle obstacles. Of course, in many other countries such as the US and Australia, the first issue is to get a paid parental leave in the first place, but this research is important because it shows that the formal State policy is not enough and that more needs to be done to ensure active participation in leave by women and men, the latter group being the more difficult to bring to increase leave take-up and length of leave (Brachet 2007).

When looking at the actual practice of parental leave take-up, it must be noted that women and parents of young children were faced with barriers in their attempts to make use of the available policies to balance work and family responsibilities. Indeed, we observed that people who had actually experienced parental leave were less optimistic than the respondents who had not experienced parental leave first-hand. It may be that those who had not taken parental leave were simply not aware of the difficulties they could encounter in applying for it nor the potentially negative impact it could have on their career. This would need further investigation since we did not find other research comparing these two groups, even in Sweden, where parental leave has been developed in the 70's as an important right of parents. Brachet (2007) shows that fathers still take shorter leaves than mothers, that the percentage of uptake is not 100%, that fathers often take the leave in summertime, when things are slower at the job; this may be some indication of a perception

of risks related to leave uptake, but the motivations were not clearly indicated as there is no data on this for the Swedish case. This is an interesting contribution of our paper, but of course it needs to be tested and confirmed on a larger scale.

Our findings also bring to light the fact that while parental leave is seen as a right, other types of leave are considered less legitimate, and again, we found no other research on this, except for the Swedish research indicating that firms had not really made important changes in corporate policies and thus, fathers still hesitate to take paternity leave, all the more other forms of family leaves (Haas *et al.* 2002).

While research has highlighted the role of organizational support for work-life balance, our research brings to light the importance of the professional category and related constraints. For example, in police work, as in much service work (Fusulier *et al.* 2006), individuals need to be replaced in order to avoid overloading their colleagues' shoulders. This can be related to the work of Fusulier *et al.* (2006) who highlight the role of the professional "ethos" or professional categories in the work-life issue, beyond national policy and organizational issues. These authors show that the professional category is another level where work-family constraints can play out; indeed, beyond national policy and firm practices, the work ethos or implication can lead individuals not to take leave for fear of being seen as less engaged in their work.

All these elements should call policy-makers' attention to the importance of informing and raising awareness on issues such as parental leave take-up and organizational support for policy implementation, but also to the need for the support of other forms of family leave as children grow up. As it has been shown by Whitehouse *et al*. (2007) in Australia and Blair-Loy and Wharton (2004) and Budd and Mumford (2006) in the UK, the implementation of a progressive family-friendly policy is not sufficient to guarantee its provision. Indeed where state policies such as parental leave are implemented, it is expected that all may benefit without penalty to career development. Otherwise the objective of the parental leave policy cannot be reached (Moss and O'Brien 2006; Tremblay 2008). Paid parental leave remains an important employee right, one not yet attained in many countries, but our results show that the concrete application and impact of this policy need to be taken into account in order for it to attain its goal.

Conclusion

Our results should bring organizations to pay more attention to the issue of obstacles to leave take-up and also to the return of leave-takers to work;[1] they should provide the support necessary to prevent any negative impact on their careers. For example, organizations could develop training programs for individuals to bring them up to date on important events that happened or to introduce them to new technologies used in the work context. They should also develop human resource training or information sessions on the importance of including parents in promotion plans and career path development.

As with any research of this nature, we recognize the limits of our survey. It was conducted in a specific sector and organization, and family issues related to aging parents were not dealt with in as much depth as we had hoped, since the interviewees were more

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[1] While Waldfogel *et al.* (1999) show that family leave coverage increases the likelihood that women will return to her employer after childbirth in the US, Britain and Japan, we found no research looking into the more qualitative dimension of the impact on the career, job content and responsibilities after leave.

concerned with parenting issues. These limitations open the way for future research. It would be important to cover other sectors: to compare sectors considered feminine or masculine, as well as sectors with different types of management structures (public, private, community) in order to see if management philosophies make a difference. Since our research gives a first indication of possible negative impacts of parental leave, future research should also look into the issue of personnel replacement, the support of colleagues' and their increase in workload. Finally, organizations should also find solutions to make up for personnel shortage problems that arise when parental leaves are taken. This is an important contribution of the paper to the study of impact of parental leave; if state policy on paid parental leave is a prerequisite, it is also important to follow up with organizational support within firms if one wants to maximize leave uptake for fathers and mothers.

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