

**Who takes ‘Shared Parental Leave’? Variations in eligibility, knowledge and attitudes across social groups in London**

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## **Abstract**

In April 2015 the UK introduced Shared Parental Leave (SPL), allowing mothers to transfer their maternity leave to their partners from two weeks after the birth or adoption of a child. There has been very limited research conducted on this leave policy to date and knowledge on take-up is poor. We present findings from an in-depth survey conducted with expectant parents in two NHS trusts in England on their knowledge, views and plans around leave after the birth of their child and examine variations across educational and ethnic groups. 856 expectant parents took part in the survey. About 7 percent of eligible expectant parents intend to take SPL. Finances and worries over fathers' careers were cited as the primary barriers to take up of SPL. Knowing others who take SPL would be most likely to encourage individuals' reported intention to take SPL. Applying logistic regression models, we found that knowledge of and access to SPL is strongly correlated with education, ethnicity and home ownership. Future research and policy design should attend to such issues to ensure equitable access across families.

**Keywords (max 6):** Family policy; parental leave; social inequality; mothers; fathers; gender

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## **Introduction**

Leave from employment for parents to take care of their children is one popular measure to enable so-called ‘work-life balance’. Maternity leave is well-established in most countries and take-up is generally high. Fathers’ access to leave, however, has received less attention.<sup>1</sup> Many countries offer a short ‘paternity leave’ which is usually taken at the same time as the mother at the time of birth. A more extensive access to leave for men is generally lacking. According to the most recent report from the International Leave Network, only 6 out of the 42 countries studied provide an incentivised father-targeted leave<sup>2</sup> beyond the short paternity leave – referred to as ‘parental leave’ - compared to 35 offering a long and highly remunerated maternity leave (Blum et al., 2017).

Yet parental leave for fathers is seen as a key policy area for promoting gender equality (Gornick and Meyers, 2009). The International Labour Organisation (ILO, 2009), for example, passed a resolution on gender equality calling for governments to develop policies which include paternity and/or parental leave, with incentives for men to use them. Such policies work by encouraging men to take on care work and by enabling women’s engagement in employment. Research demonstrates that extending leave alone to fathers promotes their involvement in childcare and housework (Schober, 2014; Tanaka and Waldfogel, 2007; Kotsadam and Finseraas, 2011). Fathers’ involvement with childcare may also positively influence both maternal and child mental well-being in some families (Twamley et al., 2013).

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<sup>1</sup> Terminology across countries varies, but here ‘paternity leave’ refers to the generally short leave given to fathers at the time of the birth. If made available, ‘parental leave’ is usually offered in addition to paternity leave. It may or may not be earmarked for fathers and usually can be taken at a time of the parents’ choosing.

<sup>2</sup> Blum et al (2017) define this as leave earmarked specifically for fathers (beyond the paternity leave allowance) paid at a minimum of two-thirds of earnings.

The UK is an example of an Anglophone country which, according to Baird and O'Brien (2015), are characterized by low levels of statutory leave provision for mothers and even less for fathers. They argue this is due to an historical emphasis on men's breadwinning roles and women's caring roles (see also Lewis, 1997). None of the Anglophone countries provide fathers with a well-compensated or lengthy individual entitlement to parental leave, although the last ten years have seen attempts to address the gap in fathers' leave, albeit in minimalist ways (O'Brien, 2013). Differential access to leave results in a schism between 'parental-leave- rich and parental leave-poor households' (O'Brien, 2009: 190). Despite the documented potential benefits of well-compensated leave, little attention has been given to the socio-economic differentials in access to leave (McKay et al., 2016). Without proper attention, parental leave policies may work to decrease the gendered imbalance in access to leave, but exacerbate socio-economic inequalities. As a consequence, some infants start their life in families with higher access to money, job-security, and parental care-giving, in comparison to others who are raised in 'parental-leave-poor households' with relatively less economic stability and support for parental care. This study examines knowledge, access and reported intention to take parental leave amongst expectant parents in the UK, focusing particularly on fathers' take-up of a newly introduced parental leave provision to examine whether and how such inequalities are observed within the UK.

### **Parental leave in the UK**

The UK leave policy has focused on long low paid leave for mothers, with less access for fathers. A nine-month long maternity leave was introduced in 1973, and extended to 12 months in 2003 when a short two-week paternity leave was introduced for fathers. Maternity leave is paid at 90% of earnings for the first six weeks; a flat-rate payment of £140.98 per week from week seven to 33; and the remaining 13 weeks are unpaid.

According to the 2009/10 survey, the mean length of maternity leave taken by women is 39 weeks – that is the paid part of the leave. Just under half take the full 12 months (Chanfreau et al., 2011). The two weeks of paternity pay are paid at £140.98 each. Some employers offer enhanced pay to their employees during leave – an estimated 28% top up maternity leave pay and 20% paternity leave pay (Chanfreau et al., 2011). Since 2011, mothers have been able to transfer their maternity leave to their partners. First through a mechanism called Additional Paternity Leave, where the transfer could happen from 20 weeks, then replaced in 2015 by Shared Parental Leave (SPL). SPL allows mothers to transfer their maternity leave entitlement to the father/partner from two weeks after the birth or adoption of a child. Fathers taking SPL can have access to the maternity pay entitlement, but from six weeks only, by which time it is a flat rate and available only until 39 weeks. SPL can also be taken simultaneously by the mother and father, and/or in blocks over the course of 52 weeks. Evidence on employer enhancements to SPL pay is lacking.

An emphasis on ‘choice’ in UK leave policy can be seen in the preamble to the Bill which introduced SPL: ‘Legislating to give parents access to flexible parental leave; so that where they want to, mothers and fathers can share caring’ (Children and Families Bill, 2013). On the other hand, the establishment of the transfer mechanism would appear to contradict the neoliberal emphasis on individual autonomy. This is likely an overhang of the UK cultural emphasis on the mother as primary carer and a reflection of the popularity of the 1.5 working household, where in many dual employed families mothers work part-time while fathers work full-time (OECD, 2017).<sup>3</sup> SPL gives the option for parents to maintain the status quo of extended maternity leave

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<sup>3</sup> The UK has one of the highest proportions of part-time employees in OECD countries, 74% of whom are women (OECD 2017).

alone, unlike fathers' quota policies favoured in Nordic countries where leave remuneration is foregone if the father does not take the leave.

Nevertheless, despite a UK emphasis on choice, eligibility for even the lowly remunerated SPL is comparatively restrictive, whereby both parents must meet the eligibility requirements for statutory maternity and paternity leave. For maternity leave, that means women employees who have worked for their employer continuously for 26 weeks, up to the fifteenth week before the week the baby is due, and who meet a minimum earnings test.<sup>4</sup> For paternity leave, employees must be the biological father of the child or the mother's husband, partner or civil partner; they should expect to have responsibility for the child's upbringing; and they should have worked continuously for their employer for 26 weeks ending with the fifteenth week before the baby is due and remain employed at the time of the child's birth.

### **What is known about fathers' leave in the UK?**

Despite policy and media interest in SPL, there has been very limited research conducted to date and knowledge on take-up is poor. The UK government does not routinely collect data on leave take-up. Data released by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills on APL, suggested very low levels of take-up, around 2%, though these cannot be taken as reliable nor necessarily indicative of the take-up of SPL.<sup>5</sup>

The UK Maternity and Paternity Rights survey (Chanfreau et al., 2011), conducted before the introduction of the maternity transfer mechanism, found that 91% of fathers took some form of leave around the birth of their child. 50% took the statutory two weeks paternity leave and 75% took at least some of the statutory leave entitlement.

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<sup>4</sup> If they do not meet the minimum earnings test, they are paid at 90% of their average weekly earnings for 39 weeks (i.e. less than the statutory pay).

<sup>5</sup><http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmhansrd/cm140403/text/140403w0001.htm>

Those who work in large private and public sector organisations are most likely to receive extra leave benefits from employers for longer periods of paternity leave, and take up is higher. The main deterrent to take paternity leave was being unable to afford it. This is likely to be compounded by relatively high shares of parents not being eligible for paid leave: analysis of the UK Labour force survey in 2017, revealed that over one-quarter (28%) of men and women in employment do not have access to paid paternity or maternity leave (O'Brien et al., 2017). Ineligibility was mainly due to respondents being self-employed or not having been in employment for the qualifying period.

A UK government sponsored survey on attitudes towards SPL found that men's greatest 'concerns' around SPL were to do with finances and their career (BIS, 2015). Qualitative research on couples' decision-making around APL, reveals that parents worry that men will face greater career penalties for taking leave than women, thus encouraging women to take more or all leave available (Kaufman, 2017). Women's desire to take the full maternity leave may also be a deterrent (Twamley, 2016).

Evidence from other countries suggests high remuneration and 'use-it-or-lose-it' policies are the most effective in promoting fathers' take-up of leave (Deven and Moss, 2002). A considerable body of research has also found that mothers' higher earnings and fathers' employers can impact on fathers' take-up of leave (Bygren and Duvander, 2006; Geisler and Kreyenfeld, 2011; Brandth and Kvande, 2002; Haas et al., 2002; Reich, 2011b). Fathers' gender egalitarian ideology and support for fathers' leave also promotes uptake (Lammi-Taskula, 2008). While if childcare is seen as the mother's responsibility, it is not easy for her to return to work before the whole parental leave period is over (Brandth and Kvande, 2003; McKay and Doucet, 2010). The latter is likely to be particularly relevant when parental leave is gender-neutral or functions via a transfer, such as in the UK.

While there is a substantial body of research on fathers' take-up of leave, the majority has been conducted in Nordic countries and in Germany. Large-scale studies have tended to rely on register and census data and are thus limited by the data collected – normally restricted to demographic and employment factors. Smaller mostly qualitative studies have elicited more nuanced data, but usually draw on retrospective accounts of parents' leave-making decisions. This is problematic since previous research has shown how accounts for leave-taking decisions can change over time (O'Brien and Twamley, 2017). An exception is Grunow and Everttson's (2016) recent cross-European study<sup>6</sup> exploring dual-earner couples' transitions to parenthood. They found that pregnant women already expect a more traditional gendered division of labour after birth due to a perceived 'culture-policy gap' which does not support shared or father-led parenting.

This paper focuses on expectant parents' knowledge, attitudes, eligibility, and reported leave intentions in the UK via a detailed questionnaire distributed at antenatal clinics in two hospital trusts in London. We have three specific aims: First, we intend to fill the research gap surrounding SPL, examining who knows about and favours SPL and who is eligible and actually plans to take it, along with the motivations and barriers to do so. Such data are vital if we are to provide a thorough understanding of processes involved in couples' policy take-up practices. Second, we investigate how and whether hypothetical variations in policy and contextual factors could shape leave take-up, using 'vignette' questions. Third, we investigate social inequalities in eligibility, knowledge, information behaviour and reported intended take-up. Much previous scholarship has focused on men and women's differential access to leave, but following recent concern over the potential social inequalities inherent in leave policies (O'Brien, 2009; McKay

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<sup>6</sup> The UK was not included.



et al., 2016), our aim is to examine whether and how UK leave policy may contribute to or exacerbate class inequalities for families.

### **Theoretical framework for investigating leave-taking plans in the UK**

Drawing on Risman's (2004) conceptualisation of gender as a social structure, combined with theories of social stratification, we consider the individual, interactional and institutional domains which shape parents' behaviour. At the individual level we consider gender ideologies, as expressed by support for traditional gendered divisions of paid work and family responsibilities, as well as what Oriel Sullivan refers to as 'gender consciousness'. For Sullivan (2006), any change in gender inequalities is unlikely to come about without a concomitant change in gender consciousness, defined as a 'process of the recognition of rights based on information from the wider society' (p87). While this may come about as a result of policy changes (Ellingsæter et al., 2017) they may also be necessary to precipitate such policies and for their widespread take-up. The interactional level refers to West and Zimmerman's (1987) 'doing gender' perspective, whereby men and women are seen to continuously remake gender through their daily practices and interactions with one another by, for example, meeting social expectations around motherhood and fatherhood. In the UK there are highly gendered models of appropriate care, despite increased discourses of 'involved' fatherhood (Gregory and Milner, 2008).

The policy context shapes actors' perceptions of their interests and constrains choice by limiting potential practices (Lewis, 2008; Grunow and Evertsson, 2016). The introduction of new policies in family and work reconciliation, such as Shared Parental Leave, enables individuals to imagine and perform new or different family practices.

Previous studies have suggested that fathers' probability of taking leave increases significantly if they have an individualised and non-transferable paid leave entitlement (O'Brien, 2009; Reich, 2011a; Geisler and Kreyenfeld, 2011). We investigate whether a hypothetical situation with an individualised leave entitlement of a similar duration for fathers as currently available for mothers would increase take-up intentions of couples in the UK. Furthermore, previous studies have shown that fathers' leave take-up rises the longer the leave entitlement has been in place and the more 'normal' take-up by fathers is perceived to be (Rege and Solli, 2013; O'Brien and Wall, 2017). Regarding these contextual features, we therefore formulate the following two hypotheses:

H1: A hypothetical individual leave entitlement of 37 weeks for each parent would be associated with a greater likelihood of planned take-up of leave among fathers.

H2: A fictitious description of more widespread use among social networks would be positively associated with planned take-up of leave among fathers.

Taking heed of O'Brien's observation (2009) of the potentially divisive nature of family reconciliation policies across different contexts, and in recognition of the multiple social differences across families, we also draw on economic and social stratification theories. According to neo-classical economic theory (Becker, 1981), paid parental leave lowers parents' opportunity costs of temporarily interrupting employment to care for the child. As outlined above, remuneration during parental leave in the UK is low – less than half of the estimated 'living wage' (TUC, 2017). To maximise household income, it would be efficient for the partner with lower relative potential earnings to interrupt paid work and specialise in unpaid work until the receipt of parental leave benefit or the period of job-protected leave expires or until external child care provision

is available at costs which are lower than the second earners' potential income. Given that men on average earn more than women in the UK (World Economic Forum, 2014), such calculations could inhibit men's access to leave and children's access to father care. Higher earning families may also find a period of low pay more feasible.

However, such a theory assumes perfect knowledge and stable preferences around family practices across different social groups, which previous research has called into question (Becker and Schober, 2017; Kan and Laurie, 2016). Drawing on the accommodation model (Chaudry et al., 2010; Meyers and Jordan, 2006), we interpret decisions around leave as “accommodations – to family and employment demands, social and cultural expectations, available information, and financial, social, and other resources” (Meyers and Jordan, 2006: 53). From this theoretical model, we expect disparities in the take-up of SPL because parents' preferences, expectations and constraints (including economic) and resources are likely to be unevenly distributed across social groups. With respect to childcare choices, previous studies from Belgium and Germany found that parents with lower levels of education and ethnic minorities on average start searching for formal childcare later, visit fewer childcare centres prior to registration, and use a smaller set of information sources (Klein et al., 2016; Vandebroek et al., 2008). Given rather complex eligibility criteria for parental leave in the UK, differences in information seeking strategies between education groups and ethnicities may result in socially stratified knowledge about parental leave eligibility and take-up intentions. Many parents will seek advice from family and friends, over and above official sources, or may simply follow what their peers already practice. To date, we do not know whether this tendency differs across social groups and how it relates to parental leave take-up intentions.

In a first step, we investigate descriptively variations in eligibility, knowledge and actual SPL take-up intentions by educational level and ethnicity. In a second step, we apply an accommodation model and explore to what extent any social and ethnic differences may be due to additional employer benefits, gender ideologies or information seeking behaviours. We formulate the following hypotheses:

H3: Less educated and ethnic minority mothers are less likely to have heard of SPL, to be eligible for SPL, to correctly know about the eligibility, to favour SPL and to actually plan sharing parental leave.

H4: Variations in extra leave benefits beyond the statutory provision by employers are likely to account for some of the observed differences between education and ethnic groups.

H5: Gender ideologies and religiousness are likely to account for some of the observed differences between education and ethnic groups.

H6: Information seeking and processing behaviours in couples are likely to account for some of the observed differences between education and ethnic groups.

## **Methods**

The survey was conducted as part of a mixed-methods longitudinal research project examining decision-making, experiences and consequences of different leave-taking patterns amongst parent couples in the UK. Only findings from the survey are reported in this paper.

### *Survey design*

A survey was selected as part of the overall project to capture the intended take-up, knowledge and attitudes towards parental leave options of a broad spectrum of expectant parents. The survey instrument was developed following a review of recent literature, a qualitative pilot study<sup>7</sup> and a consideration of items used in the Understanding Society UK Household longitudinal study.<sup>8</sup> Face and content validity of the developed instrument was pretested with a group of expectant parents known to the first author (n=5). This process resulted in an instrument containing a combination of multiple-choice, Likert scale and open-ended questions. The questions covered (1) demographic background, including employment history and plans; (2) knowledge of and attitudes to UK leave policy; (3) leave intentions and decision-making (4) gender and family ideology; (5) knowledge seeking behaviour and (6) hypothetical behaviour under different policy contexts. Copies of the survey instrument are available on request from the corresponding author.

### *Survey distribution*

The majority of survey respondents were recruited at antenatal clinics in two hospital trusts – one in central London and one on the outskirts of London. The trusts were selected based on the diverse group of parents that access the services. The interviewer approached parents in the clinic waiting rooms with an information leaflet outlining the aims of the survey. Participants were given five minutes to consider their participation and, if they consented, were then given an iPad in which to complete the on-line survey. Only one parent from each couple was asked to fill in the survey – either parent could consent – and they were instructed that they should answer the questions from their personal perspective only. The questionnaire gave the participant the opportunity to

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<sup>7</sup> Author A

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk>

forward a linked survey for their partner to complete at a later time. A paper copy was also offered if preferred – only one did. A small sample of parents was recruited on-line via pregnancy and parenting websites. Surveying expectant parents during pregnancy has a methodological advantage because couples are at this time making important decisions about their individual careers and family life. This affords us the opportunity to investigate expectant parents' plans and ideas about their future. Survey responses were anonymous, unless respondents chose to leave their contact details for a follow-on qualitative interview, in which case they were informed that the lead researcher would have access to their answers and contact details.

#### *Analysis methods*

To investigate how contextual factors, such as the type of entitlement which the statutory parental leave policy provides (H1) and leave taking among the social network (H2), may affect couples' division of leave, we included vignette questions in the survey. These asked expectant parents how much leave each they and their partners would use under different hypothetical context scenarios. We compare these answers to participants' actual plans of parental leave take-up in the current context. The difference in the percentages of participants' reporting intention to take leave may be interpreted as indicative of the relevance to planned behavior, which they may alter if the context changes. Yet, they cannot be interpreted as definitive causal evidence.

We then examine variations across social and ethnic groups (H3) with respect to five binary dependent variables: having heard of SPL, eligibility to SPL, knowledge about the eligibility, general approval of SPL and actual plan to share parental leave.

We apply multivariate logistic regression and calculate average marginal effects to facilitate the interpretation of the results.

To explore whether extra leave benefits beyond the statutory provision by employers (H4), gender ideologies and religiousness (H5), or information seeking behaviours (H6) correlate with the dependent variables and may account for some of the variation across socio-economic groups, we add them separately to the regression models. To be able to compare the size of coefficients across different same-sample nested logit models, we apply the ‘KHB method’ to the coefficients. This corrects for the effects of rescaling in different model specifications and allows us to separate the effects of confounding from rescaling (Karlson et al., 2012). Furthermore, the KHB-method may be used to decompose the total effect of a variable into a direct and an indirect effect. The basic idea of the method is to compare the full model with a reduced model that substitutes the additional explanatory variables, i.e. gender ideologies, employer benefits, and information behaviours, with the residuals of these variables from a regression of these additional explanatory variables on the socio-economic status variables (for details, see Karlson et al., 2012). The KHB method consequently allows us to calculate what percentage of the correlation between the socio-economic status and the dependent variables is reduced after including the additional explanatory variables.

#### *Sample and demographics of respondents*

A total of 856 expectant parents took part in the survey. 820 of these were recruited at antenatal clinics and 36 over the internet. 609 (74%) of the sample were female. Of these, 34 were interrupted and called to an examination, so that 575 women were able to complete the questionnaire. The analysis outlined below is based on female

participants only, as the male participants were usually the partners of women who had also answered the questionnaire. A higher than expected proportion hold a college or university degree -76% in contrast to 38 % among the London population as a whole in 2011 (Office for National Statistics, 2013b). 48% are homeowners, similar to the proportion recorded for London in the 2011 census, while 38% identify as white British – slightly less than the 45% noted in the same census (Office for National Statistics, 2013a). This reflects the diverse populations of the clinics where the majority of the data collection took place. Some questions have only been asked to parents who were working for pay or were a full-time student at the time of the interview, so some modelling steps will focus on this group of 481 mothers. The rate of item non-response was generally low but occurred most frequently for the gender ideology items (6 %) and for items asking about information seeking behavior (12%).

## **Operationalisation of dependent and independent variables**

### *Dependent variables*

We regard having heard of SPL, generally approving of SPL, being eligible to take it and knowing about this eligibility as preconditions to actual take-up of SPL. We explore social inequalities in these four aspects in addition to variations in the actual plans to share parental leave. We constructed five binary variables. We distinguished whether respondents said “yes they had heard of SPL” as opposed to those who answered ‘no’ or ‘not sure’. After giving a short description of what SPL entails, we asked respondents whether they were in favour of this policy and combined the categories not in favour and not sure, as very few expectant parents said they were not in favour. We calculated whether respondents met the conditions of eligibility of parental leave based on both partners’ employment status, women’s due date and the time women will have been



working for the same employer. In addition, women were asked whether they believe that their partners are eligible to take any of four different leave options. We compared these beliefs with the calculated eligibility measure to capture respondents' knowledge about eligibility. We constructed three categories: i) exact match between eligibility and belief, ii) respondents believe they are eligible but based on their responses to the employment and tenure questions they would not be, and iii) respondents who are eligible but believed they were not or indicated that they were not sure. As the third category included only 14 (1.6 percent) of the respondents, we combined these with the second category and continued with a binary variable in the subsequent analysis.

Expectant mothers were also asked whether the couple intended to take maternity leave, paternity leave (1-2 weeks at time of birth) and shared parental leave (both parents take part of maternity leave).

#### *Key explanatory variables*

To measure respondents' educational qualifications, a dummy variable distinguishes between i) university graduates and ii) those with lower levels of qualification (No formal qual, GCSE, A-levels, or vocational training). More detailed categorisations proved difficult due to small numbers in each of the categories. For the same reason, the ethnicity variable only distinguishes between i) white British respondents and ii) other ethnicities.

To capture additional support from employers beyond the statutory leave regulations, a dummy variable differentiates between i) any extra leave benefits and ii) no such benefits or not sure.

To capture gender ideologies and beliefs, respondents were asked to express their level of (dis)agreement on a five-point scale for four items: i) A man's job is to earn money; a woman's job is to look after the home and family, ii) Both the man and woman should contribute to the household income and the care of home and children, iii) A father can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with his children as a mother, iv) Nursery care can be as beneficial for preschool children as family care, and v) Sharing equally the care of a child is beneficial for the parents' relationship. We recoded the first item in a way that higher values indicate greater agreement with gender egalitarian attitudes. Based on standardized items, we conducted a factor analysis and combined them into one index of gender egalitarianism. To facilitate the interpretation, the factor score has a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1 and ranges from -2 to +2. An alpha of 0.75 indicates an acceptable level of reliability.

To capture religiousness, respondents were asked whether they practice any religion and if so, which one. As a more detailed distinction of religious affiliations did not show any different results, we use a dummy variable to measure any religious practice.

To better understand how women sought information about different leave options and how they discussed them with their partner, they were asked if when deciding on whether and how to take leave, they i) consulted information websites on leave eligibility and options (such as citizens advice or Working Mothers), ii) consulted family and friends about their experiences of leave in helping me decide what kind of leave to take, iii) discussed with their partner what leave options would work best for our family, iv) calculated the financial implications of different leave options, or whether v) they did not consider any other leave options. They were offered four answer options but we present only the distinction between respondents who answered “yes, a lot” as opposed to those who used each of these to a lesser extent.

### *Control variables*

As demographic variables may also influence parents' knowledge of SPL and plans to take leave, we control for age, parity, marital status, and home ownership as measure of household income and wealth.

### **Results**

Table 1 reports descriptive statistics. Overall, 61 percent of expectant mothers reported to have heard of SPL. After a brief description of what SPL entails, 76 percent of mothers expressed favorable views. Based on the reports of their own and their partners' employment and tenure, 68 per cent of the couples were eligible to take SPL. Interestingly, among employed mothers only 64 percent correctly reported their eligibility. The majority of those who did not correctly report this were not sure about their eligibility. Based on the sample of eligible working mothers, only 7.4 percent of the couples were planning to take shared parental leave.

When asked about reasons for not planning to share leave, the following were mentioned most often among the top three reasons: i) it does not make financial sense (51 percent), ii) fear of negative impact on male partner's career (37 percent), iii) being not eligible (26 percent), iv) sharing might inhibit the mother's ability to breastfeed (24 percent), and v) mothers wanting to take as much leave from employment as possible (23 percent).

### *Context scenarios*

To better understand the importance of contextual factors, respondents were asked two hypothetical questions - how much leave each of the partners would take if fathers had individualized leave entitlements of 37 weeks, and if most of the colleagues and friends

shared leave, respectively. The findings are displayed in Table 1. Even though the results of the scenario questions can only give us a rough idea whether contextual factors affect take-up, as they may be subject to social desirability bias and respondents may not take into account realistic trade-offs, the large hypothetical changes in take-up intentions from just over 7 to 42 and 52 percent, respectively, indicate that both factors would most likely increase take-up of leave by fathers. This is in line with Hypotheses 1 and 2. Interestingly, social norms seem more important than individual leave entitlements for fathers.

### *Social and ethnic differences*

To examine social and ethnic inequalities in attitudes, knowledge and intentions of taking SPL (H4), we consider differences by education, ethnicity, birthplace and home ownership while controlling for demographic characteristics in a first modelling step. Table 2 summarises the results showing average marginal effects based on logistic regression models. For all five dependent variables, we find significant differences between respondents with and without a university degree. University-educated respondents are by 22 percentage points more likely to have heard of SPL and by 17 percentage points more likely to be in favour. They also have a greater chance of meeting the eligibility criteria, with a difference of 12 percentage points. Higher educated women are also significantly more likely to correctly report their eligibility and to intend to take shared leave by 22 and 8 percentage points, respectively. Both can be classified as large given the relatively low baseline probabilities.

Ethnicity shows slightly smaller associations with the five dependent variables. The probabilities of having heard of SPL and being in favour of SPL are 13 and 10 percentage points higher for White British respondents than for ethnic minorities. There

are also 22-percentage-points more likely to correctly classify their eligibility. The difference in actual eligibility amounts to 10 percent but is only statistically significant at the 10-percent level. For leave intention, the difference does not reach statistical significance. Respondents who were not born in the UK were significantly less likely to have heard of SPL, but no significant differences were found for the four other outcomes. In addition, home ownership only correlated significantly with a high chance of having heard of SPL and with being eligible. Most of the control variables did not show significant associations with the dependent variables. The only exceptions were that older mothers had more often heard of SPL and mothers who were expecting their third or higher order child were less likely to be eligible to take SPL.

In a second modelling step, we added information on additional employer leave benefits, gender ideologies, religiousness, and information seeking and discussion processes in couples to the models. Table 3 shows average marginal effects based on the logistic regression models. As some of the questions have only been asked to working women, the number of observations is smaller for all the models. Women whose employers provide additional leave benefits are more likely to have heard of SPL, to favour SPL, to be eligible, and know about their eligibility. Extra employer benefits are not correlated with a higher likelihood of intending to share parental leave with the partner.

Women who hold more egalitarian gender ideologies are more likely to correctly report leave eligibility and to intend sharing leave. A one-standard-deviation increase is associated with a roughly 10-percentage-point higher probability in both domains. Women who actively practice a religion are less likely to be in favour of SPL with a difference of 12 percentage points.

Women who frequently informed themselves about leave options and eligibility are more likely to have heard of SPL. However, none of the other four outcomes significantly correlates with internet searches. Women who frequently consulted family and friends about their experiences were less likely to correctly classify their leave eligibility status, whereas the other outcomes were uncorrelated. What correlated most strongly with four out of the five leave outcomes was the frequency of discussions about leave options with the partner. Women who reported having discussed a lot with the partner were more likely to have heard of SPL, to be in favour of SPL, to know about their eligibility and to intend to share leave with their partners. Some of the correlations may imply reverse relationships with mothers who are better informed and more enthusiastic about the option of SPL being more likely to discuss with their partners in order to achieve actual sharing of leave.

In a third modelling step, we use the khb decomposition analysis to examine whether extra employer benefits, gender ideologies, or information seeking and choice behaviours accounted for any of the differences by educational level and ethnicity. Table 4 shows the estimated average marginal effects for women with a college degree and non-white British ethnicity in a model with just control variables, in comparison to a full model including additional employer benefits, gender ideologies, and information seeking. For all models, including these variables significantly reduces the associations with education and ethnicity. However, as can be seen from the significance levels of the various indirect paths tested, the only consistently significant confounder was whether the employer offered extra-statutory leave benefits. For some of the relationships, its contribution to the difference between the reduced model and the full model was only marginally significant at the 10-percent level. The only other significant indirect effect concerns religiousness, which was found to mediate the

relationship of ethnicity with the extent to which expectant mothers were in favour of the new SPL legislation. These findings provide support for Hypothesis 4, which assumed that extra-statutory employer benefits would account for some of the variations across education and ethnic groups. Hypotheses 5 and 6, however, have to be rejected, as neither gender ideologies and religiousness nor information seeking and deliberation seemed to account significantly for social and ethnic variations in our five outcomes measures. The partly significant direct effects of these factors in Table 2 suggest they may well be important for parental leave attitudes, eligibility knowledge, and intentions but they do not contribute much to understanding the considerable differences found between expectant mothers with and without a college degree and of different ethnic origins, respectively.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

This is a cross-sectional survey of a relatively small and somewhat selective sample of primarily expectant mothers in London, with university educated expectant parents over represented. Nonetheless, our study provides important insights into eligibility and take-up of the new UK maternity leave transfer policy known as Shared Parental Leave. Our study finds an overall low proportion of parents intending to take SPL, despite a high proportion expressing favorable views. Such low take-up is explained by a variety of factors. While a high proportion of respondents report having heard about SPL, there are deficits in knowledge about eligibility, which constitutes a key obstacle to greater take-up of SPL.

Other reasons of non-take up of SPL were also uncovered, including how different context features, such as an individual entitlement for fathers and widespread take-up, might matter for take-up intentions. Participants reported higher levels of take-

up if an individual entitlement to leave was introduced, but other people taking leave appeared as more salient in improving take-up levels. This is likely to be due to perceived norms of fathers' involvement in family care - qualitative research shows that UK parents worry that the 'unusualness' of fathers taking extended leave leads to worse career repercussions than for mothers (Kaufman, 2017; Twamley, 2016). Indeed, the most reported barriers to take SPL were financial reasons and the risk to the partner's career. Using the language of Grunow and Evertsson (2016), there is currently a 'culture-policy gap' in the UK, with popular support for shared parenting, but policies that encourage parents to focus on the mother's role in care work via a poorly remunerated maternity leave transfer mechanism.

We have also uncovered important findings of considerable social and ethnic variations in attitudes, eligibility, knowledge, and take-up intentions, specifically that non-home owners, those with a lower education and of a minority ethnic background are less likely to be eligible for SPL, and that those with a lower education and of a minority ethnic background are less likely to intend to take it. O'Brien et al. (2017) found similar associations between eligibility of paid maternity and paternity leave and social characteristics, reporting that Pakistani parents and those in intermediate, semi-routine or routine occupations were less likely to be eligible. The variations we found are also correlated with extra-statutory employer benefits. Previous research has shown that when employers provide additional compensation for parental leave, men take longer leaves (Hobson et al., 2006). In a context of low remuneration and low take-up, this is likely to become even more important.

Overall, our findings are in line with hypotheses drawn from the accommodation model (Chaudry et al., 2010; Meyers and Jordan, 2006) as regards education and ethnicity. Gender ideologies and discussions in couples appear to



influence relevant outcomes, though for the most part do not significantly account for social and ethnic variations. Future research should consider a large representative longitudinal sample with couples, which will be more able to unpack the causal effects of extra employment benefits, gender ideologies and information seeking and couple discussions. A partly reciprocal relationship is possible with people who value extra-statutory leave benefits more or who want to share parental leave being more likely to choose certain jobs and employers and to discuss more with their partner, as, for example, reported by Grunow and Evertsson (2016).

As with research from other countries, we have shown that paternal leave take-up tends to be most likely among highly educated parents. Importantly, however, we have shown that *eligibility* for leave in the UK is stratified, limiting potential choices of parents (see also McKay et al. 2016 for similar findings in Canada). As argued by O'Brien et al. (2017), there is likely to be growing inequalities and divisions between parents with and without access to paid leave as employment contracts further diversify, including via zero-hours contracts and the rise in number of self-employed (ONS, 2017). Future research and policy design needs to attend to such issues to ensure equitable access across families.

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Table 1: Descriptive statistics

Variables	Mean/ perc.	SD
<b>Dependent variables</b>		
Heard of SPL	61.18	
In favor of SPL	76.46	
Eligible of SPL	67.65	
Knowledge gap in SPL eligibility	43.63	
Intending to share leave	7.42	
<b>Scenario 1: if 37 weeks individualized entitlement for fathers</b>		
Switch to shared leave	41.39	
Stay with only maternity leave	16.74	
Stay with shared leave	4.18	
No response / not sure	37.67	
<b>Scenario 2: if most colleagues and friends shared leave</b>		
Switch to shared leave	51.62	
Stay with only maternity leave	09.02	
Stay with shared leave	4.63	
No response / not sure	34.72	
<b>Independent variables</b>		
No college degree	23.82	
Ethnic minority	63.89	
Not Born in UK	49.49	
Renting home	48.11	
Additional employer leave benefits	42.75	
Actively practising religion	38.20	
Gender role egalitarianism (factor score ranging from -3 to +1)	0.01	0.91
Consulted information websites a lot on leave options	17.26	
Consulted family and friends a lot about their experiences of leave	16.62	
Discussed with partner a lot about leave options	54.32	
Calculated a lot the financial implications of leave options	42.18	
First birth	52.22	
Second birth	34.76	
Third or higher order birth	13.01	
Older than 35 years	29.93	
Not married	27.90	
Employed	71.18	
Self-employed	10.33	
Not employed or full-time student	18.47	
Partner employed	76.14	
Partner self-employed	17.67	

**Table 2: Average marginal effect of having heard of SPL, being in favour, being eligible, knowing about one's eligibility, and intention to take up SPL (based on logistic regression models)**

	Heard of SPL	In favour of SPL	Eligible to SPL	Correct report of eligibility	Intends to take SPL
No college	-0.22*** (0.06)	-0.17** (0.06)	-0.12* (0.05)	-0.22*** (0.07)	-0.08*** (0.02)
Ethnic minority	-0.13* (0.06)	-0.10* (0.05)	-0.10+ (0.05)	-0.22** (0.07)	-0.07 (0.05)
Not born in UK	-0.12* (0.06)	-0.04 (0.05)	0.05 (0.05)	-0.03 (0.07)	0.04 (0.04)
Renting home	-0.15** (0.05)	-0.07 (0.04)	-0.17*** (0.04)	-0.06 (0.06)	0.01 (0.03)
Older than 35	0.10* (0.05)	-0.04 (0.04)	0.01 (0.04)	0.07 (0.05)	-0.00 (0.03)
2 <sup>nd</sup> birth	0.06 (0.05)	-0.01 (0.04)	0.01 (0.04)	0.06 (0.06)	-0.00 (0.03)
3 <sup>rd</sup> or higher birth	-0.08 (0.07)	-0.06 (0.06)	-0.19** (0.07)	-0.17* (0.08)	0.02 (0.06)
Not married	-0.02 (0.05)	0.07 (0.04)	-0.01 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.06)	0.01 (0.03)
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.14	0.08	0.09	0.10	0.04
Observations	467	461	504	352	381

Note: Standard errors are shown in parentheses. Questions about knowledge of eligibility and intentions of sharing leave have only been asked to employed mothers, hence the smaller number of observations.

+  $p < 0.10$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

**Table 3: Average marginal effects based on logistic regression models for pregnant women in employment (full model)**

	Heard of SPL	In favour of SPL	Eligible to SPL	Correct report of eligibility	Intends to take SPL
No college	-0.25** (0.09)	-0.06 (0.07)	-0.05 (0.06)	-0.26** (0.09)	- <sup>a</sup>
Ethnic minority	-0.11+ (0.06)	-0.02 (0.05)	-0.09+ (0.05)	-0.16* (0.08)	-0.09 (0.06)
Extra employer benefits	0.13* (0.05)	0.16** (0.05)	0.11* (0.05)	0.12* (0.06)	0.06 (0.04)
Egalitarianism factor	0.02 (0.03)	0.02 (0.02)	-0.02 (0.03)	0.09* (0.04)	0.11* (0.05)
Religious	-0.06 (0.05)	-0.12** (0.04)	-0.02 (0.04)	-0.07 (0.07)	0.04 (0.04)
Frequent website information	0.21* (0.09)	0.13 (0.08)	-0.08 (0.06)	0.13 (0.10)	-0.05 (0.06)
Frequent discussion with social networks	-0.07 (0.07)	0.02 (0.07)	0.13+ (0.07)	-0.16* (0.08)	-0.04 (0.04)
Frequent discussion with partner	0.18** (0.06)	0.12* (0.05)	-0.04 (0.05)	0.12+ (0.07)	0.14** (0.05)
Frequent calculation of financial implications	0.05 (0.06)	-0.01 (0.05)	0.01 (0.05)	0.00 (0.07)	-0.01 (0.04)
Not born in UK	-0.09 (0.06)	-0.07 (0.05)	0.15** (0.05)	-0.01 (0.08)	0.04 (0.05)
Renting home	-0.15** (0.06)	-0.01 (0.05)	-0.08+ (0.05)	-0.01 (0.07)	0.03 (0.04)
Older than 35	0.08 (0.06)	0.01 (0.05)	-0.01 (0.05)	0.11+ (0.07)	0.01 (0.04)
2 <sup>nd</sup> birth	0.12* (0.06)	-0.09+ (0.05)	0.08+ (0.04)	0.04 (0.07)	-0.02 (0.04)
3 <sup>rd</sup> or higher birth	0.04 (0.09)	-0.13 (0.08)	0.06 (0.06)	-0.15 (0.11)	0.04 (0.08)
Not married	0.04 (0.06)	0.01 (0.06)	-0.01 (0.05)	-0.02 (0.08)	0.04 (0.05)
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.26	0.21	0.16	0.19	0.19
Observations	261	257	271	227	255

Note: Standard errors are shown in parentheses. <sup>a</sup> College degree fully predicts planned take-up of shared parental leave, therefore it cannot be included in the model.

+ p < 0.10, \* p < 0.05, \*\* p < 0.01, \*\*\* p < 0.001

**Table 4: Average marginal effects and KHB-decomposition of college education and non-white ethnicity**

	Heard of SPL	In favour of SPL	Eligible to SPL	Correct report of eligibility	Intends to take SPL
<b>No college (reduced)</b>	-.30**	-.14+	-.08	-.32**	-. <sup>a</sup>
<b>No college (full)</b>	-0.25**	-0.06	-0.05	-0.26**	-
<i>Significance of</i>					
Extra leave benefits	*	*	+	*	-
Egalitarianism factor	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	-
Religiousness	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	-
Frequent website information	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	-
Frequent discussion with social networks	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	-
Partner discussions	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	-
Frequent calculations	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	-
<b>Ethnic minority (reduced model)</b>	-.17**	-.07	-.11*	-.21**	-.12+
<b>Ethnic minority (full model)</b>	-0.11+	-0.02	-0.09+	-0.16*	-0.09
<i>Significance of indirect effects via:</i>					
Extra leave benefits	*	+	+	+	+
Egalitarianism factor	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Religiousness	n.s.	+	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Frequent website information	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Frequent discussion with social networks	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Partner discussions	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Frequent calculations	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Observations	261	257	271	227	255

Note: n.s. indicates 'not statistically significant'. <sup>a</sup> The number of not college-educated mothers who plan to share leave is too small to estimate this relationship.

+ p < 0.10, \* p < 0.05, \*\* p < 0.01, \*\*\* p < 0.001