

What's biology got to do with it? Parental leave use among adoptive and biological parents  
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## **Introduction**

What role does biology play for parents' usage of parental leave? The parental insurance of Sweden assigns men and women the same rights and obligations regarding family life and labour market work. Still, mothers use 77% of all parental benefit days and although fathers' share of leave has increased (from 0,5% in 1974 to 23% today) the development is slow and large differences between men and women remain (Swedish Social Insurance Agency 2011). One often used explanation to this difference is that mothers need substantial time after childbirth to connect to the child, to breastfeed and to recover from the delivery (Elvin-Nowak 2005, National Social Insurance Board 2003).

In the European Union there is also support for mothers' initial home stay. In 2008 the European Commission suggested increased and obligatory maternal leave related to the delivery (European Parliament 2011). The aim of the proposal was to improve the protection of pregnant workers and of workers who recently have given birth or are breastfeeding. However, this suggested legislation has caused great debate and has not yet been determined. The member states have raised concerns regarding financial consequences of the suggested policy, issues of self-determination of the member states, and the obligatory and non-gender-neutral aspects of the policy (EurActiv 2011).

To bring more clarity regarding the importance of the biological factor for the use of parental leave we will compare the use of parental benefit days between biological and adoptive parents. Swedish rules and regulations for these groups of parents are almost equal. However, circumstances for adoptive parents are essentially different from those of biological parents. For adoptive parents the "missing" biological factor should allow a more flexible use of parental leave, perhaps also when the child is older. The adoptive children are long planned and awaited before arrival, and such a "planned parenthood" could point towards a different allocation of parental leave days between the parents.

## **Background**

The Swedish parental leave is closely related to goals of gender equality and supports equal division of childcare and participation in the labour market. It is often mentioned that gender equality in childcare will lead to gender equality in other household chores as well as in the labour market. Emphasized is also children's right to access to both parents. Since the introduction 1974 the structure of the insurance has been revised a number of times, in e.g. length of leave, compensation levels, and reservation of periods for each parent. Today the parental leave per child is thirteen months with income-based benefit and three months paid at a lower flat rate. The income-based benefit is set at 80 % of earlier earnings up to a ceiling. Individuals who do not fulfil conditions for the income-based benefit (i.e. often students or long-term unemployed) are compensated at the flat rate level during the whole leave. This construction gives strong incentives for establishment in the labour market before entering family life (Sundström & Duvander 2002, SOU 2005).

The leave can be used to the child's 8<sup>th</sup> birthday which allows for large flexibility in use. The leave is individual in that parents are entitled to 240 days each, but one may sign over days to the other parent, except for 60 days that are non-transferable. As mothers use more than three quarters of the leave it is most common for fathers to sign over days. In connection to the childbirth the father is entitled to ten daddy days (Swedish Social Insurance Agency 2011).

Adoptive parents follow slightly different regulations. After the child's arrival, parental benefit days may be used for the following eight years, or until the child turns ten. In connection with the adoption parents are entitled to temporary parental benefit: five days each that are transferable (Swedish Social Insurance Agency 2011).

Swedish family policy is often referred as one of the main reasons for high fertility rates in the country (see for example: Bernhardt 1993, Hoem 2005, Ellingsaeter 2009). In terms of cohort measures the Swedish fertility is stable and a two-child norm has been prevalent during decades. The childlessness for women over 45 is low and has not varied much between periods. However, the age at first child has increased both for men and for women but yet there is no tendency of families to have only one child (Statistics Sweden 2002). Nevertheless, even if fertility has been stable in one sense it has also, in terms of period total fertility ratios, varied a lot during recent decades. As conditions of the parental insurance give strong incentives for labour market work before the entrance of family life, and unemployment and education are not easily combined with childrearing in Sweden, economic business cycles have caused great fertility variations (Hoem & Hoem 1996, Andersson 2000).

Together with Denmark and Norway, Sweden has the highest share of internationally adopted children per capita. International adoptions started relatively early, already in the end of the 50's. According to the Swedish Intercountry Adoptions Authority (MIA) about 50 000 children have been adopted ever since (MIA 2009). The last decade the number of adoptive children has been around 700-1000 children per year. Most of the adopted children in Sweden originate from South Korea (Statistics Sweden 2007). Although parents may have preferences regarding the adoptive child's origin and sex, the demands by the adoption organizations of the countries of origin are determining. They specify demands on the parents regarding their age, education, income, marital status, length of marriage etc. (MIA 2010).

Adoptive families and biological families are different in several aspects. Studies have shown that adopted children have, due to a rather different childhood, a more vulnerable position than do children grown up with biological parents (Hjern, Lindblad & Vinnerljung 2002, Landerholm 2003). Adoptive families likewise face other problems than biological families. Communication problems are more common and adoptive children are at a larger extent placed in institutional care (Elmund 2007). The composition of biological and adoptive parents is different in age and education (Statistics Sweden 2007) and presumably income. Adoptive parents are older and higher educated compared to biological parents. The circumstances of becoming parents are different. Adoptive parents have participated in mandatory parents' education to gain knowledge and understanding about the adoption procedure, being adoptive parents and the special needs of their children. The parents have also undergone an investigation and approval by the local Social Affairs Committee (MIA 2010). They are "certified" in a way that biological parents are not.

There are no previous comprehensive studies on adoptive parents' usage of parental benefit days. We have brief information from the annual reports by Swedish Intercountry Adoptions Authority regarding parents' share of leave. Between 1999 and 2004 the authority asked adoptive parents about the division of parental leave during the child's first year, and the answers indicated that women used the main part of the days (MIA 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004). However, there are no further details to this information. From studies of parental leave use in the whole population we know that leave use is influenced by parents' age, income, education, work situation, origin and the child's birth order (see for example Sundström & Duvander 2002, Berggren 2004, Duvander 2008). As earlier stated we believe that the "missing" biological factor of adoptive parents allows a more flexible use of parental benefit days. The fact that adoptive children are long planned and awaited may result in a more equal division of the days. The children are somewhat older when they arrive which would indicate shorter parental leave, but on the other hand emphasis in the information to adoptive parents on attachment and language acquisition speaks for the opposite (The National Board of Health and Welfare & MIA 2007).

### **Data and method**

The study will use register data from STAR (Sweden in Time – Activities and Relations) administered by Stockholm University Demography Unit and Swedish Institute for Social Research. This comprehensive database contains information about adoption, parental benefit days, income,

education, age, and family relations such as birth order. In STAR parental benefit days are summed up per year and parent.

We will investigate the period 1991 to 2007 in which we study 13 426 internationally adopted children. We consider families where both parents *jointly* have adopted the child. Consideration will be taken to parents' divorce or separation as well as arrival of siblings during the study period.

We will study the parental leave use of adopting mothers and fathers and compare this to biological mothers and fathers. We are interested in the division of leave between parents, but also how the leave is spread out between the years it can be used. For our older cohorts we will be able to follow the leave use for the whole period it can be used, i.e. to the 8<sup>th</sup> birthday for biological children and to maximum the 10<sup>th</sup> birthday for adopted children. We will control for individual characteristics of parents such as age, education and income as well as the relations between these characteristics between parents in the same couple as this has been shown to influence parental leave use in earlier studies (see for example Sundström & Duvander 2002). We are interested in the potentially different patterns of leave use but also in whether parents' and couples' characteristics will influence the leave use differently in biological and adoptive families.

We will start with descriptive analyses of the division of leave, as described above, both in amounts and over the child's preschool years. We will thereafter use different strategies of analysis. We will attempt a hazard regression of leave length but also multinomial models where we categorize the outcome.

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