

## Exploring COVID-19 lockdowns as unexpected paternity leave: One shock, diverse gender ideologies

Alix Sponton<sup>1,2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Sciences Po, Observatoire sociologique du changement. <sup>2</sup> Institut National d'Etudes Démographiques

Address correspondence to: Alix Sponton, OSC - 27 rue Saint-Guillaume, 75337 Paris Cedex 07 (France). Email: [alix.sponton@sciencespo.fr](mailto:alix.sponton@sciencespo.fr)

### Abstract

**Objective:** This paper analyses how men who became fathers to a newborn during a 2020 lockdown in France reacted to spending longer time at home than intended.

**Background:** Previous research found that fathers taking longer leave are more involved at home, but men who plan these working arrangements are more oriented towards gender equality. Due to the COVID-19 outbreak, fathers with diverse gender ideologies were forced to stay home with their baby.

**Method:** 42 longitudinal interviews were conducted with 23 fathers, before and after the birth of their child. 10 of these fathers unexpectedly stopped their paid work for the first two months post-partum because of distancing measures. This group is compared with 10 others who took at most their 14 days of paid leave before returning to paid work and 3 others who deliberately planned to take a month off. All mothers were on maternity leave.

**Results:** Lockdowns isolated couples from the help of extended family and fathers had to assume a caregiving position. However, staying home involved different things for different fathers. For some, it meant sharing unpaid work equally. For others, it was more about bonding with the baby, whereas intensive childcare was considered the mother's role.

**Conclusion:** Drawing on an *integrative approach*, the findings suggest that changes at the institutional level, such as lockdowns, impact fathering trajectories differently depending on gender ideologies at the individual level.

**Key words:** fatherhood, childcare, housework, parental leave, France



## 1. Introduction

In recent years, leave policies have been the preferred way to promote men's involvement in unpaid work in several European countries, such as France. Childbirth is identified as a crucial step in the gendered specialization of work between partners (Régnier-Loilier 2015). Because French work-life policies have primarily addressed mothers, women are institutionally recognized as the main caregivers, and fathers remain uninvolved (Boyer & Cérroux 2010; Windebank 2001). The latest reforms thus aim to encourage fathers to be present with their newborn, with the assumption that this will result in them developing the longer-term habit of taking an active role in family responsibilities.

Yet studies exploring the effects of these policies on men's engagement are confronted with a selection bias. Men who decide to take some time off after a birth are more oriented toward family and gender equality than others (Duvander 2014; Petts & Knoester 2018; Rehel 2014), which makes it hard to disentangle whether the leave is really behind their greater involvement. This selection is a key issue in understanding the role of legal regulations in the gender division of labor.

The context of the COVID-19 pandemic has created unprecedented conditions in which to observe how fathers become involved once liberated from professional constraints. In 2020 in France, physical distancing measures have forced many fathers to stay at home with their newborns, without paid work, for at least two months. Their experience can be likened to an unexpected period of "leave" and one considerably longer than the two weeks of paid paternity leave to which they were entitled at the time.

This study contributes to the literature by exploring how fathers with diverse gender ideologies reacted to spending longer time at home with their baby than intended. Gender ideology in that respect is defined as "individuals' levels of support for a division of paid work and family responsibilities that is based on the beliefs in gendered separate spheres" (Davis & Greenstein 2013: 87). This study distinguishes traditional ideology (as the belief that mothers should be caregivers and fathers breadwinners) and egalitarian ideology (as the belief that partners should equally engage in both family and work spheres) (Hochschild & Machung 2012).

Based on 42 longitudinal interviews with 23 fathers before and after the birth, the article analyses the impact of the COVID-19 "shock" on fathering trajectories. The sample includes 10 fathers who had to stop working because of a lockdown, 10 fathers who could take up to two weeks off before returning to work, and 3 others who decided to take a month off before the pandemic outbreak. For the purposes of comparison, the article focuses on the first two months post-partum, a period during which none of the mothers were doing paid work.

After introducing the theoretical background and the methodology, the paper begins the analysis by examining how distancing measures affected the family arrangements of parents with a newborn. Drawing on an *integrative approach* (Risman 2004, 2018), the findings then explore how fathers with contrasting gender ideologies responded differently to their unexpected availability at home.

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## 2. Theoretical background

### *2.1 Gender inequalities in unpaid work before and during the COVID-19 pandemic*

Over the last half century, the gender gap in time spent on housework and childcare has narrowed in European countries, yet women still do the lion's share (Altintas & Sullivan 2016). In France, two-thirds of the total hours doing domestic chores and care tasks continue to be spent by women (Pailhé et al. 2021).

The pandemic has not changed the overall picture. In March 2020, France began implementing a series of movement restrictions, which directly affected the organization of family life by impacting individuals' work situations. Most significantly, a first strict lockdown (March 17 – May 11) confined the three-quarters of the population to their homes for two months (Foucault and Galasso 2020). A second (October 30 – December 15) and a third (from March 30, 2021) lockdown followed, this time with more professions allowed to pursue their activities.

Lockdowns increase the total amount of unpaid work to be performed by each household, by making formal and informal outsourcing (to institutions, housekeepers, family members, etc.) impossible. Results concerning the first lockdown in France indicate that women did most of the unpaid work, particularly laundry, cleaning, and homework supervision (Champeaux & Marchetta 2021; Recchi et al. 2020). Across European countries, studies share similar observations that, despite an absolute increase in the time men spent on housework and childcare, women continued to perform on average two-thirds of the unpaid work in Spain (Farré et al. 2020), the United Kingdom (Hupkau & Petrongolo 2020; Sevilla & Smith 2020), and Germany (Hank & Steinbach 2020; Kreyenfeld & Zinn 2021).

Nonetheless, the pandemic has not affected every couple in the same way (Hank & Steinbach 2020; Kreyenfeld & Zinn 2021). This article explores one of the specific circumstances under which the COVID-19 outbreak is expected to have reduced the gender gap in family work: when fathers spent a longer time than expected at home with their newborn.

### *2.2 Fathers at home with their baby: An opportunity to reduce the gender gap*

The literature has well established that childbirth is linked to a greater specialization within heterosexual couples (for France, see Régnier-Loilier 2015). Over the last twenty years, research has taken more and more of an interest in the role of institutional factors in this process (Lachance-Grzela & Bouchard 2010; Noonan 2013). In most European countries, such as France, public policies structure divergent parental trajectories for mothers, who learn how to care for their baby alone during their maternity leave, and fathers, who quickly return to paid work (Boyer & Cérroux 2010; Windebank 2001). Some studies have argued that if men and women were to experience the post-birth period in the same conditions, they would develop similar parental skills and become active co-parents (Rehel 2014). A growing number of quantitative studies have found that fathers taking at least some leave are more involved in childcare in France (Pailhé et al. 2018), Germany (Bünning 2015;

Schober & Zoch 2019), Sweden (Almqvist & Duvander 2014; Haas & Hwang 2008), and the United Kingdom (Tanaka & Waldfogel 2007). There is, therefore, some evidence that spending time with the baby from the outset may increase men's involvement in the family sphere.

However, a key concern of previous research has been the selection of the most family-oriented fathers into this kind of policy. Both qualitative (Rehel 2014) and quantitative studies (Duvander 2014; Lammi-Taskula 2008; Petts & Knoester 2018) have highlighted that high prenatal involvement and egalitarian gender ideologies drive decisions on leave-taking. Studies in France (Chatot 2017) and in Germany (Reich 2011) also pointed out that fathers taking longer leave have very specific profiles, such as living with a partner who is better educated or earns more income than they do. From this perspective, taking time off might reflect, not cause, greater engagement toward family work. Would fathers with traditional gender ideologies engage similarly in parental work and house chores if they had more time home after the birth?

The COVID-19 pandemic has enabled us to observe how fathers react to spending several months off with their infant, irrespective of their initial intentions. From March 2020 onwards, many French fathers had to stop working and found themselves available at home for several months. These fathers spent considerably more time home with their baby than the average in France at the time. Indeed most French fathers (68%) take two weeks off after a birth, using their 11 days of paid paternity leave in addition to their 3 days of paid birth leave (Legendre & Lhommeau 2016). Almost none (0.8%) use an unpaid parental leave to spend several months off in the first year of their child (Périer & Verdugo 2021).

This study explores how fathers from diverse sociodemographic backgrounds and with different gender ideologies get involved with their baby and house-related chores when they spend several months home after the birth. Foucault & Galasso (2020) observed that at the beginning of the first lockdown, 38% of employed individuals were jobless, with no significant gender gap. A large variety of profiles was affected, despite differences across sectors – “blue collar” and “service” workers more likely to be non-working (both approximately 25%) than “white collar” (11%).

Men who stopped working because of the pandemic were on furlough and, as such, were compensated and were expected to return to their job—making them even more available at home compared to fathers looking for a job. Hence, the experiences of these men can be likened to an unexpected period of “leave”<sup>1</sup> and can be viewed as a natural experiment.

### 2.3 *One shock, diverse responses*

Several theories predict that being on furlough should lead fathers to share domestic obligations. From a structural perspective, men's engagement in childcare and housework should automatically increase if they are no longer impeded by organizational barriers. In particular, *time availability theory* (Bianchi et al. 2000) suggests men's workload reduction due to the pandemic should have prompted them to reinvest freed-up time into family

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1 Interviewed fathers made this comparison themselves.

work.<sup>2</sup> Structural theories are gender neutral in the sense that they suppose fathers and mothers act in the same way when placed in equivalent situations (Risman 2004, 2018).

Conversely, the *doing gender theory* has emphasized that men and women do not face the same expectations and perform masculinity or femininity by (not) doing domestic chores and care tasks (West & Zimmerman 1987). In addition, *socialization theories* support the idea that individuals internalize gender norms and act according to what they believe is a proper behaviour for a man or a woman (Lachance-Grzela & Bouchard 2010). These perspectives suppose that, available or not, fathers seek to meet gender expectations whatever the circumstances.

Two bodies of literature appear particularly relevant to analyse how fathers on furlough could respond to their sudden availability, and they complicate an either/or perspective. First, literature on fathers on leave sheds light on men's experiences when they are temporarily home at the beginning of their baby's life. Existing studies on this subject suggest that spending time at home with a young child leads men to develop more parental skills and to perceive childcare as highly demanding (Brandth & Kvande 2003; Chatot 2020; Doucet 2009; O'Brien & Wall 2017; Rehel 2014). Yet, these studies also show that the transforming potential of leave is significantly greater when fathers experienced being alone with their baby. Contradicting structural theories, fathers appear to remain a secondary support person for mothers when both stay home together – which would be the case of this study.

Second, the literature on men unable to meet their breadwinner ideal because of financial or professional constraints gives insight into how men react to the disjuncture between their expectations and their experiences. Research on unemployment suggests at-home fathers increase their engagement in unpaid work to various degrees depending on their gender ideology (Chesley 2011; Legerski & Cornwall 2010; Pochic 2000). These studies suggest that egalitarian and traditional fathers might respond very differently when they become available, with the former engaging in unpaid work, while the latter resist. Legerski and Cornwall (2010: 461) revealed a “gender inertia” in traditional couples as “old gender beliefs remained intact, reinforcing a traditional division of labor and negating opportunities for change in practice.” By contrast, Deutsch and Saxon (1998) found that traditional men alternating work shifts with their spouse for economic necessities did share childcare responsibilities during the time their spouse worked outside the home. Their research suggested that, in practice, these couples were egalitarian, even if they claim not to be as a way to do gender through discourse. Do traditional men really do less or do they only say they do less to fit their ideal? It could be that these fathers try to avoid typically feminine tasks when their partners are around but are left to do gender through discourse when have no other choice than to be the one in charge. Indeed, Deutsch and Saxon (1998) specified that fathers did not necessarily continue to participate in childcare when both parents were home together. In any case, overall these studies highlight the importance of considering how material constraints and gender ideologies intersect when studying family

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2 Another central structural theory is the bargaining theory (Lundberg & Pollak 1996), according to which fathers would lose weight in the negotiations on house chores if the crisis put them in an economic disadvantaged position relatively to their partner. However, this theory does not appear pertinent here as fathers on furlough were compensated and expected to return to their job as soon as the lockdown ended (especially during the first lockdown, when interviewees thought the crisis would be over in summer 2020).

arrangements. It appears that the allocation of unpaid work is an imbrication between a multitude of dimensions, such as institutional, organizational, and economic constraints, and individuals' gender norms (Schadler et al. 2017; Suwada 2021).

Rather than opposing structural and interactionist theories, the *integrative approach*, such as that developed by Risman (2004, 2018), suggests analysing how they intersect to understand both the mechanisms underlying change and resistance in the gendered specialization of work. Risman (2004, 2018) conceptualizes gender as a social structure with three interrelated levels: macrological (material constraints and dominant norms), interactional (social expectations), and individual (internalization of gender norms). The gender structure is not static, and examining how a change at one level reverberates at others can help to identify how to “undo gender” and to reduce inequalities (Deutsch 2007; Risman 2009). Social distancing provoked a sudden structural shift change at the macrological level home. According to this multidimensional approach, fathers should react differently to restrictive measures and their consequent availability depending on their gender ideologies and the social expectations with which they try to comply.

The literature has emphasized how the formation of gender ideologies is a complex process, partly linked to socialization and education (Davis & Greenstein 2013). Similar perceptions of the social world are usually related to the proximity of individuals' situations in the social space (Bourdieu 1979). Thus, this paper looks at social backgrounds and past trajectories to identify potential regularities in gender ideologies across social classes. Following Bourdieu (1979), this paper adopts a multidimensional perspective on social stratification, considering both economic capital (e.g. wages) and cultural capital (e.g. education) to situate individuals in the social space.

Since the pandemic affected fathers from diverse social backgrounds simultaneously and with diverse gender ideologies, this study is able to examine the role of gender norms once organizational constraints are removed. This paper therefore proposes an empirical application of the *integrative approach* by considering the diverse responses to the “COVID-19 shock” based on fathers' trajectories and, in particular, on the previous allocation of unpaid work within the couple and their gender ideologies.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 *Sampling strategy*

This study is part of a larger doctoral research project focusing on the various work arrangements adopted by French fathers for the arrival of a baby and their repercussions on men's involvement at home. The research design includes three repeated semi-structured interviews with fathers: a first interview up to three months before the birth, a second interview before the baby was three months old, and a final interview after a year. In this paper, analyses rely on first wave and second wave interviews only.

The initial research protocol was adapted to take account of the pandemic context. Interviews started in October 2019 and are ongoing as of March 2021. The outbreak of COVID-19 has had an impact on the professional situation of many participants, and most

significantly those who had their child just before or at the beginning of a lockdown (Table 1).

Table 1: Distribution of participants by birth period

	Jan.	Feb.	March	April	May	June	July	August	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.
2019										1		1
2020	3		⑥	③			1	2	1	①		
2021	2				2							

⑥ Number of births for which fathers paused their professional activity for at least 8 weeks  
 → Lockdowns: 17 March – 11 May; 30 October – 15 December

This article focuses on fathers who, because of distancing measures, stopped working for the first two months after their baby was born. Their situation is compared to those of fathers whose return to work on site was not disrupted by the pandemic. The participants were categorized into three groups, according to the amount of time fathers spent home after the birth and whether or not that time at home was anticipated (Table 2).

First, 10 fathers are qualified as *circumstantially available*, as they unexpectedly stopped paid work because of distancing measures. Those who had their baby shortly before a lockdown took their paternity leave immediately after the birth. Consequently, all fathers in this group experienced a break of at least eight weeks for the first two months post-partum. Among this group, six participants were part of the original panel. To obtain more testimonies of men in a similar situation, four additional interviews were conducted in August 2020 with fathers whose child was born in March/April 2020.

Second, 3 fathers are qualified as *deliberately available fathers*, since they took a month off by extending their paternity leave with regular leave, irrespective of the context. A study of the Directorate of Research, Analysis, Evaluation and Statistics (Drees) estimated that about a quarter of French fathers use this kind of informal arrangement (Bauer & Penet 2005). As fathers who take longer leave are believed to be particularly family-oriented, in this study they constitute a separate group to compare when presence at home is planned or circumstantial.

Finally, 10 fathers are qualified as *unavailable*, as they used at most their 14 days of paid leave before returning to work on site.

This paper does not incorporate the cases of fathers working from home, although some are present in the original sample. Telecommuting blurs the distinction between the professional and family spheres and has specific impacts on the division of labor (Sullivan & Lewis 2001) which cannot be developed within the framework of this article.

The period examined in this paper corresponds to the first two months post-partum. The two months threshold was used for the purposes of comparison. Since all the mothers were either on maternity leave or not working during that time, only paternal availability varied. Hence, no father in the sample spent the post-partum period alone with their baby.

Table 1: Groups of fathers according to their time off after the birth

	<i>Circumstantially available</i>	<i>Deliberately available</i>	<i>Unavailable</i>
<b>Group size</b>	10	3	10
<b>Description</b>	Stopped paid work because of distancing measures	Extended paternity leave with regular leave	Used at most paid leave
<b>Time off (in weeks) after childbirth</b>	At least 8	At least 4	Between 0 and 2
<b>Period of birth</b>	Just before or at the beginning of a lockdown	At least two months before a lockdown	At least two months before a lockdown
<b>Work situation</b>	On furloughs (9) or unemployed (1)	On leave	Working on site

### 3.2 Participants' characteristics

To promote a diversity of profiles within the sample, prior to March 2020 participants with contrasting demographic characteristics were sought via hospital maternity and ultrasound waiting rooms in four areas of the Paris region (7). In addition, the study relied on more classical snowball sampling (11) and on social media (5), with no geographical restrictions within France.

The study included 23 participants from diverse backgrounds (see Appendix). Fathers came from a wide range of professional sectors, including construction (site construction, electricity, plumbing), culture (journalism, education, entertainment), service (hotel and restaurant industries), and IT (consulting, software industry). Following the French classification of professions and socio-occupational categories, the sample categorizes a total of 9 fathers as higher level occupations (40%), 7 as working in intermediate occupations (30%), 6 as manual workers and 1 as non-manual employee (30%). More specifically, the subgroup of the 10 fathers of particular interest includes 3 executives, 3 in intermediate occupations, 3 manual workers, and 1 non-manual employee.

Most participants (19 out of 23) are first-time fathers, which is useful for exploring the traditional division of labor between partners, beginning with the birth of the first child (Grunow & Evertsson 2016). Most couples were full-time dual earners before the birth, with 4 mothers not professionally active and 2 others working part-time.

### 3.3 Interviewing procedure

Half of the interviews were conducted face to face and half remotely (via phone or video call). This study follows French legal regulations and approval was obtained from the local

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body responsible for data protection. After I provided information about the research project, each participant gave their consent for participating in the study and audio-recording the interviews. To protect identities, this study uses pseudonyms and limits the sorts of contextual details supplied in descriptions (such as residence area or specific details on occupations). Although not a deliberate strategy at first, the remote interviews turned out to be more effective for exploring intimate topics with the participants more deeply (Trier-Bieniek 2012), such as conflicts between partners or the division of unpaid work. The duration of the discussions did not vary by mode or wave of interview (90 minutes on average).

Longitudinal interviews allowed to track the mechanisms at work in fathers' identity construction, early fathering practices, and developments in couples' paid and unpaid work situations. Prenatal discussions covered both partners' academic and professional careers, partners' daily paid and unpaid work before/during pregnancy, childcare plans for the baby's arrival, and gender ideologies. Conducted soon after childbirth, second wave interviews permitted rich, detailed descriptions of daily life with a newborn. Postnatal discussions focused on what had happened since the birth, the allocation of childcare and housework duties between partners, and how this varied depending on the father's work situation.

### 3.4 Analysis

This study focuses on *circumstantially available* fathers. Their cases are systematically compared throughout the paper to *unavailable* and *deliberately available* fathers, to identify differences and similarities in their trajectories. Qualitative longitudinal analysis followed the steps recommended by the literature (Vogl et al. 2018), by forming individual case profiles and comparing them on a cross-sectional level, and by looking at individual trajectories and comparing trajectories.

The paper pays special attention to the different social mechanisms underlying the diverse activities that can fall under the broad umbrella of domestic work (Roy 2012). Previous research has highlighted that men's involvement was greater in occasional tasks, such as domestic repairs and maintenance, than routine tasks, such as cooking, cleaning, and doing the laundry (Hochschild & Machung 2012). Fathers also spend more time doing childcare-related activities than household chores (Pailhé et al. 2021) and, in terms of parental tasks, more time doing recreational activities rather than primary caregiving (Brugeilles & Sebille 2013). These dynamics might indicate the reproduction of a gendered hierarchy within unpaid work, with men's greater involvement at home being primarily directed towards the most socially valued tasks (Devreux 2004). As such, this article is careful to examine the different types of tasks that participants avoided or devoted themselves to.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 *Fathers as unexpected caregivers*

Whatever the context, most participants described the first two months with a newborn as highly demanding. Days and nights are punctuated by feedings at least every three or four hours, nappy-changing, and sometimes ceaseless, inexplicable crying. In interviews conducted before the birth, almost all fathers explained that they thought it important that mothers were not entirely alone at home in the weeks following the return from the hospital. This dominant norm was supported by the medical profession, with midwives or doctors usually advising mothers—and indirectly fathers—to arrange backup for this difficult time.

Yet the helpers did not necessarily have to be the fathers. Before the birth, many mothers (19 out of 23) expected to host visitors or visit others, usually to get support from other women who already had children (mothers, sisters, in-laws, cousins, or friends). From the fathers' perspective, this female expertise was reassuring, providing the mothers with advice on how to take care of the baby. However, as Dorian explains, these women were also taking on the role of informal caregiver:

I hope people will come help during the day. I'm mostly relying on our mothers to play their part as grannies! (...) Well, *especially during the daytime when I won't be here.* (...) To change nappies, to rock the baby so [my partner] can sleep. She will have to get up every three hours anyway [for breastfeeding], but she won't have to do more than that, so she can rest. That and doing everything related to household chores.  
- Dorian, 33, construction technician, first child, birth: October 2020, prenatal interview [emphasis added]

Dorian, who initially planned for one week off after the birth, highlighted how his mother and mother-in-law were crucial in helping both his spouse—so she can rest—and himself—so he does not have to be the one helping. Getting support from relatives was a prerequisite for most men (12/23) to be able to return to paid work soon after childbirth. For others (7/23), relying on extended family in the early weeks was a way of postponing their paternity leave and making sure that it would provide quality time; for instance, during a holiday period or when the baby is older and considered better able to interact.

Due to distancing measures such as lockdowns and border restrictions, the pandemic made it impossible for many parents to receive the support they were counting on. In the sample, 11 couples out of the 23 interviewed between 2019 and 2021 had to adjust their initial plans, which ultimately resulted in fathers finding themselves in a caregiving role.

This was the case for Frédéric, a 37-year-old kindergarten teacher becoming a father for the first time. Well before the estimated due date, his sister-in-law requested one week off from work to travel from southern to northern France to stay at their place and lend a hand. The baby arrived in late March 2020, and the lockdown prevented her from travelling. Like 10 other fathers in the sample, Frédéric's work virtually stopped for the first two months

after childbirth, so he was available to give his partner the support that his sister-in-law was no longer able to provide.

As household-based policies, physical distancing measures compelled couples with a newborn to operate as nuclear families. Yet not all fathers reacted the same way to their unexpected caregiving position depending on their gender ideologies.

#### 4.2 *“I had learned of maternal instinct, but now I can actually see it in action”: Doing gender despite availability*

Of the 10 fathers who interrupted their paid work because of the pandemic, 5 endorsed a traditional ideology. In the first wave of interviews, Ethan, Rayane, Pierre, Dorian, and Mani described their belief in natural gender complementarity. To them, it was modern nonsense to think that a baby needs its father as much as its mother, when she was the one who carried the baby and the one breastfeeding.

Compared to the sample as a whole, they were relatively young parents, four of them having their first child before the age of 30. According to Bourdieu’s multidimensional perspective on social stratification (Bourdieu 1979), these men hold more economic than cultural capital. Except for Ethan, a copy writer, they had received vocational training (3) or attended an engineering school (1) and worked in the construction sector or as a cook.

Before the birth, a gendered organization of work was already in place in their union. Fathers were the main breadwinners in 4 out of the 5 cases. Their partners had shorter working hours (3) or did not have a paid job (2) and were doing most of the routine tasks (cooking, cleaning, doing the laundry). The couples intended to increase this specialization once the baby was born. These fathers approved of their partner stopping paid work, or encouraged it, at least for the first one or two years of the baby’s life, arguing that it was in the child’s best interests. These fathers initially planned to take the 3 days of birth leave and at least some of the 11 days of paternity leave.

Finding themselves at home for two months did not alter their view that mothers are primarily responsible for children. As such, the *circumstantial availability* of these five fathers generally translated into participation in routine childcare and housework only when their partner was not able to do it. All mothers needed to recover from childbirth, and so, overall in the sample, all fathers took on more unpaid work at the very beginning of the baby’s life. However, some women had more harrowing labor experiences than others. This was the case for Lina, Rayane’s partner, who suffered severe complications during delivery and required surgery. After returning to Lina’s parents’ house, where the couple spent the lockdown, Lina was bedridden for the first two weeks, and it was over a month before she could walk properly again. During this period, Rayane described how he took care of his daughter:

I learnt how to give her a bath and so I was doing it because my wife couldn't get up. (...) At night, we had to give her the baby because she was breastfeeding, but she couldn't carry the baby. (...) *My wife couldn't look after her, so I was forced to... to take it on myself.*

- Rayane, 29, engineer, first child, birth: March 2020, postnatal interview [emphasis added]

Ethan and Dorian also supported bedridden partners and shared very similar stories. "I looked after the baby... *It had to be me.* Later, when she could get up, she did it" (Dorian) [emphasis added]. The unavailability of their partner gave them the responsibility for taking care of the baby, which otherwise reverts to the mother. Their active involvement resulted in them acquiring childcare skills and a better realization of the extent of the work required to look after a new baby, but the role reversal left their traditional ideology unchanged:

You stay at home longer, so you see how tough it is to get up at night, that you cannot even take a shower in peace because you have a baby and you have to leave the door open so you can hear if she cries...In that sense, it develops your sense of responsibility because *you kind of take on the mother's role*, the role she has during her maternity leave. So you really get to see the job of a mom! (...) The role of a mother is irreplaceable, and the role of a father is not...it doesn't have the same weight.

- Rayane, 29, engineer, first child, birth: March 2020, postnatal interview [emphasis added]

Even though temporary circumstances made these fathers the child's main caregiver, they were careful to insist that it should not be that way. This finding echoes Deutsch and Saxon's study (1998), which pointed out that, when traditional couples divide childcare equally, claiming that the mother was the central parent was a strategy to continue doing gender through discourse. The researchers sensed that the participants of their study would go back to a gender specialized arrangement as soon as they were no longer compelled to share family work due to organizational constraints. The present results confirm their hypothesis.

When they felt well enough, the mothers resumed their role as main caregiver (feeding, changing nappies, soothing the baby, etc.), and the fathers their role as deputy. At nights, mothers managed alone most of the time. In the four couples who breastfed during the two months, fathers did not (continue to) get out of bed to bring the baby to the mother. More generally, fathers rarely took responsibility for everyday chores such as cleaning, doing laundry, or cooking. In any case, for Pierre and Rayane who spent the lockdown at their parents'/in-laws' place, most of the housework was performed by the relatives they lived with. In this respect, it might not be coincidental that the only two couples in the entire sample who spent lockdown with extended family shared similar profiles and traditional beliefs.

In the end, the gendered specialization of tasks quickly resulted in mothers developing greater expertise in caring for the baby, which was naturalized by fathers as a so-called maternal instinct, an expression used by Rayane, Dorian, and Ethan:

I knew I had heard of maternal instinct, but now I can actually see it in action on a day-to-day basis. (...) She can predict things five minutes ahead. Generally, when I say, “I think she’s hot” and she says “no”, or when I say “I think she is going to sleep” and she says “no”, very often she’s right.

- Ethan, 30, copywriter, first child, birth: April 2020, postnatal interview

By mystifying their partners’ competence and “playing dumb” (Hochschild & Machung 2012), these fathers resisted acquiring these skills despite their availability. Such strategies were used for instance to avoid waking up at night:

Despite all my efforts, maternal instinct makes her hear the baby crying a lot faster than I do. (...) We’ve argued about it once or twice. (...) And you know, you get to the point where you’re asking yourself: “What can I do to wake up? What can I do to sleep less deeply?” (*ironically*) Should I be setting alarms and waiting for the baby to wake up?

- Ethan, 30, copywriter, first child, birth: April 2020, postnatal interview

Along with their efforts to distance themselves from what they considered to be the mother’s role, these five participants were trying to correspond to their ideal of a “good” father. In this respect, being the breadwinner was crucial for them. Before the birth, these men mentioned becoming a father increased their sense of responsibility to be economically stable. As Dorian put it during the prenatal interview: “In my opinion, a father who doesn’t work is a bad father (...) If anyone should get their hands dirty, it’s the man, clearly!” Two months at home did not change their views. Thus, Mani and Dorian expressed guilt and apprehension when they found themselves in precarious professional situations because of the pandemic. Mani lost his job, and Dorian was on a trial period at a company dangerously accumulating debt. Conversely, the three others felt confident about returning quickly to their paid work after the lockdown. Their discourse was radically contrasting, presenting the lockdown as an opportunity to “be present” with their child.

By being present, these fathers did not mean dividing every task equally and sharing childcare responsibilities like egalitarian fathers, but more generally bonding with the new baby. Although breadwinning was the main and primary requirement to correspond to a “good” father, the second condition was to be a recognizable figure for their child:

Being a good father is providing for your family. *If possible*, it’s also being present in raising your child. (...) Well, necessarily, because, you know, your daughter won’t remember that you put food on the table. *You also have to live moments with her*, laugh with her, play with her, read her stories, all that, you see.

- Rayane, 29, engineer, first child, birth: March 2020, postnatal interview [emphasis added]

To Rayane, responding to the family’s primary needs through financial support was too indirect and invisible for bonding with his daughter – quality time was more efficient in this regard. The pandemic context gave these fathers time to connect with their baby through cuddles, stimulation or reading stories, and sometimes bath times, activities they interpreted as pleasant and interactive. Pierre, a site manager of 28, felt proud that his son

showed signs of being able to recognize him (by his smiles, his way of looking at him, etc.). To him, the 2020 spring lockdown was “a stroke of luck...if I can say that. It allowed me to see [my son’s] development, to spend time with him *that would have been impossible otherwise*” [emphasis added]. Impossible indeed, as for Pierre it was unmanageable to be absent from his job for several consecutive weeks. With his company temporarily closed, the context gave him the unique opportunity to align himself with the norm of “present father” without conflicting with the expectations of his co-workers—the situation was not his responsibility—or missing steps in the progress of projects - all activities were shut down.

In the end, when engaging in parental tasks, these traditional men headed more towards social activities rather than primary care. Ethan summarized the intersection between gender and parenthood:

I’m a bit less involved in, in the important tasks, and a bit more in the superficial. (...) I feel that how I am with my baby, it’s more about entertainment, it’s more to stimulate her, and all that. With his mum, it’s more about feeding her, changing her, all that.  
- Ethan, 30, copywriter, first child, birth: April 2020, postnatal interview

Presenting the fathers’ role as “superficial” was flattering to the “essential” mothers, yet it was also convenient to let their partner manage alone the most tiring parental tasks, especially at night. This distinction reproduces a hierarchy within unpaid work, with men taking over the parental activities commonly perceived as the most enjoyable (Brugeilles & Sebille 2013; Devreux 2004).

### 4.3 “*I had an important role to play and it was gratifying*”: Seizing the opportunity to undo gender

In contrast, the other five *circumstantially available* fathers were heavily involved in taking care of the baby during the first two months after birth. The profiles of Frédéric, Aurélien, Loïc, Nelson, and Maxence echoed those of the three fathers who *deliberately* paused their professional activity for at least a month, a decision unrelated to the pandemic. Except for Loïc, they all were endowed with greater cultural than economic capital, insofar as they were working or had degrees in intellectual or cultural spheres (journalism, education, music, research, tourism). Their partner had their first child at an older age than the rest of the sample, around 35 years old. They were among the few men in the total sample who believed in prioritizing family over working or having a career. Apart from Nelson, they were in favour of an equal division of housework, which they shared before the birth. Furthermore, like the three *deliberately available* fathers, Frédéric, Aurélien, and Loïc also felt that there was absolutely no distinction between a mother and a father, a belief that was a distinctive characteristic compared with the sample overall. The major difference, of course, is that they initially planned to spend only two weeks at home with their new baby.

In fact, a key characteristic of these fathers is that they were the main financial provider within their unions. Maxence’s and Aurélien’s partners were even struggling with long-term unemployment. In contrast, the *deliberately available* fathers were partnered with

executives on long-term contracts and high wages. As such, the initial unavailability of these five fathers could be interpreted as being driven by institutional and organizational constraints.

During lockdown, they did at least half of the infant care. Most often, parents watched the baby one at a time. Where the mother *was not* breastfeeding (Aurélien and Nelson), couples divided childcare in shifts and rotated every three or four hours—each time the newborn(s) was/were supposed to be fed (Nelson had twins). The designated parent for the shift would have to give the baby/babies a bottle, change their nappies, and soothe them.

I woke up at 6 a.m. because she was crying, so I changed her, I fed her. I stayed with her, she felt asleep around 7 a.m., so one hour later (...). She woke up again around 11 a.m. (...), *at 11 a.m., my wife took care of her for this time slot.* And then, at 3 p.m., well... I came back.

- Aurélien, 30, receptionist, first child, birth: March 2020, postnatal interview [emphasis added]

The other parent could also be around to lend a hand or to spend some quality time as a family. However, the core principle of this relay was to allow each parent to get enough sleep, at least at night, and to enable them to be attentive to the child(ren). Where the mother was breastfeeding (in the other three cases), the process was similar but more specialized. Parents would also take turns, but feeding was always the mother's responsibility (none was using a breast pump). At night, all three fathers woke up to bring the baby to their spouse so she could stay in bed. Considering breastfeeding to be highly physical, the fathers therefore did more of the routine household chores (cooking and the baby's laundry) to allow their partner to rest.

These fathers described their presence as essential for dealing with the intense care work required by a newborn: "I really don't know how she could have done it all alone" (Aurélien); "I became a fervent advocate of extending paternity leave" (Maxence). Thus, they presented the lockdown as a factor that greatly facilitated the post-partum period, since they were protected from paid-work fatigue:

I remember telling my partner: "It's not as bad as I thought!" (...) I mean, yes, of course, we didn't have to get up! So, it allowed us to follow [our daughter's] rhythm completely.

- Frédéric, 37, kindergarten teacher, first child, birth: March 2020, postnatal interview

Following couples through their journey as first-time parents, Fox (2009) also found that the rare mothers who described the months following the birth as a happy period and not as a period of exhaustion were the ones who shared unpaid work with their partners and relatives.

Being intermittently responsible for the baby required fathers to develop their skills to meet to their baby's needs more efficiently, similarly to fathers on leave alone (Brandth & Kvande 2003; O'Brien & Wall 2017). For Aurélien, it was by empirical experiments that, with the help of his partner, he slowly distinguished the different signals given by his daughter:

Well, in the beginning, when she cried... First, I checked her nappy. Then I tried giving her something to eat. Then I gave her a cuddle. That's what it was like at first. When I had no clue! And eventually, my wife would say, "That's a such-and-such cry. And that's a such-and-such cry", etc. And in the end, by listening to the crying and seeing what works... well, you understand (...) you start to guess if she's still hungry, if she's done a poo, if she needs a cuddle.

- Aurélien, 30, receptionist, first child, birth: March 2020, postnatal interview

The high level of involvement of these five fathers appears strongly linked to their belief that there was no natural distinction between fathers and mothers, which can be understood as a way of undoing gender (Deutsch 2007; Risman 2009). Because they conceptualized parental expertise as a learning process, and not as maternal instinct, they believed they could acquire the knowledge and skills required to care for their child in the same way as their partner.

Contrary to traditional fathers, these egalitarian fathers did not minimize their involvement with the baby so mothers could be presented as the central parent. Quite the opposite, presenting themselves as primary caregiver appeared socially valued. Maxence, a 34 years-old journalist, described: "Since [my partner] wasn't feeling great at the beginning, it gave me an important role. And I was pleased to have this role. I had an important role to play and it was gratifying". These men described the lockdown as an opportunity to realize their ideal of equally involved parents in the child's early life, in an institutional context that would have made it difficult otherwise.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

As household-based interventions, physical distancing measures such as lockdowns and movement restrictions have isolated families with a newborn from the help of their extended families (usually from women who already had a child). Couples found themselves forced to divide domestic tasks between spouses. Overall, fathers in the sample assumed a larger caregiving role in the context of the COVID-19 crisis.

However, the pandemic did not affect all fathers in the same way. Using an integrative approach (Risman 2004, 2018), this article highlighted how men reacted differently to their unintended extended presence at home, depending on their gender ideologies and their couple's previous division of unpaid work. In other words, the consequences of the sudden institutional changes at the macrological level varied depending on the social expectations faced by fathers at the interactional level and the internalization of gender norms at the individual level (Risman 2004, 2018).

Men who expressed egalitarian beliefs were highly involved in childcare, dividing shifts equally with their partner to meet the baby's primary needs (feeding, changing nappies, soothing, etc.). Their reduction in professional activity due to physical distancing requirements eliminated structural barriers that would have impeded this, without too

many repercussions on their paid work. Only a mandatory paternity leave could replicate similar conditions.

Nevertheless, availability alone was not enough to predict fathers' care practices. Men who believed in the natural complementarity of the sexes and who already were involved in a gendered specialization of work before the birth continued to consider mothers as primary caregivers. In general, fathers participated strongly in family work when their spouse needed to recover from childbirth, whatever their gender ideology. However, traditional couples re-established a specialized gender division of labor as soon as the mother got well. Rather than time availability, therefore, the involvement of these men appears to follow the logic of female availability: the pandemic showed that fathers were most heavily involved in infant care and household chores when no mothers, grandmothers, or sisters were available.

Results echo and develop the findings of previous research on men's engagement in childcare and housework. First, material constraints intersect with individual gender ideologies. As research on unemployed fathers in France (Pochic 2000) and in the United States (Chesley 2011; Legerski & Cornwall 2010) pointed out, the reallocation of unpaid work when men are involuntarily constrained to stay home depended on the degree to which they felt pressured to be a breadwinner. These studies also linked gender ideologies to social milieu. However, the results here do not suggest an opposition between a traditional working class and an egalitarian upper-middle class, but rather a distinction between the economic and the cultural poles of Bourdieu's multidimensional space of social positions (Bourdieu 1979). The findings problematize an overly mechanistic approach according to which fathers and mothers would parent similarly if they were to experience the post-partum period in the same circumstances. Supportive family policies enabling fathers to stay home after a birth appear as a condition, not a guarantee, for men to take on the responsibility for childcare and housework.

Secondly, gender ideologies appear to resist circumstantial contradictions. Like the traditional couples with untraditional lives in Deutsch and Saxon's study (1998) or the unemployed working-class fathers from Legerski and Cornwall's study (2010), participants who expressed a traditional gender ideology maintained their conviction that fathers and mothers have different roles, despite their—sometimes considerable—participation in childcare. This result does not contradict past studies on stay-at-home fathers and on fathers on leave which highlighted how practice leads to a better understanding of the difficulties involved in parenting (Brandth & Kvande 2003; Chatot 2020; Doucet 2009; O'Brien & Wall 2017; Rehel 2014). Fathers' perceptions did shift as they came to the conclusion that caring for a newborn was more intense and time-consuming than expected. Although they valued it as highly demanding work, it remained nonetheless a "mother's job". That said, this article does not argue that attitudes remain fixed forever and can never be altered. It might be that the first couple of months of lockdowns do not constitute a sufficient deviation from the norm to destabilize individuals' past socialization. In this regard, Chesley (2011) suggested it took several years for unemployed fathers to feel comfortable with their at-home status.

Lastly, when fathers believe that mothers are primarily in charge of childcare and housework, their involvement in unpaid work is conditional on their partner's unavailability. This finding aligns with the study by Deutsch and Saxon (1998), which

showed that traditional fathers who alternated shifts did not necessarily continue to engage in childcare during the time their wife was at home with them. Research has also highlighted that it is when fathers are alone during their leave that they develop the most parental skills and a sense of responsibility (Brandth & Kvande 2003; O'Brien & Wall 2017). This could partly explain why paternity leave has a greater effect on men's participation in household chores and parental tasks when used after the mother's return to work (Bünning 2015).

The results reveal not only the persistence of the gender division of labor but also the circumstances in which potential change may occur. The article argues that, to some extent, men did put their egalitarian views into practice when freed from organizational constraints. In this sense, the functioning of institutions and organizations does not merely reflect gender inequalities, it conditions them (Holter 2007). Institutions and organizations need to adapt to enable individuals to undo gender.

Since this present study focuses only on the months immediately following childbirth, it is not possible to draw any conclusions on the potential longer-term impact of the lockdowns on these fathers' parental trajectories. In particular, this article cannot explore whether fathers remained involved or not after returning to paid work. Answering these questions involves following these fathers over time, one aim of the ongoing research project which includes a final interview one year after the birth. Although the present article already found differing responses to the crisis from 10 cases, future research would benefit from studying a larger sample to give a more detailed picture of the different reactions to a same institutional shock. Finally, this article focuses largely on first-time parents, a situation that may have accentuated the involvement of men with their newborn. The presence of older children at home usually diminishes the propensity of fathers to care for the younger child (Brugeilles & Sebille 2013; Clément et al. 2019).

Looking after a newborn is usually described as exhausting, let alone when the caregiver is unable to walk. In a context where taking care of a newborn is individualized, the presence of at least one other adult with the mother in the first two months post-partum appeared to facilitate fatigue management. The difference between before and during the COVID-19 pandemic therefore relates to the person providing the support. Physical distancing measures compelled fathers to take a caregiving role, replacing female relatives' informal help. In recent years, many European countries such as France have established or extended paternity and second parent leave, strengthening the nuclear family model of both parents being the main caregivers of their children. These public policies could be seen as institutional recognition that men should engage in family work, at least for parenting.

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## Appendix

Table A.1: Characteristics of the 23 participants and their partners

Pseudonym		Age		Occupation		Education		Birth		Panel		Comparison group	
Father	Mother	Father	Mother	Father	Mother	Father	Mother	Child's rank	Prenatal interview	Group	Gender ideology		
Pierre	Juliana	28	25	Site foreman	Childcare assistant	Vocational	Vocational	1	Yes	Circumstantially available	Traditional		
Ethan	Julie	30	30	Copywriter	Communication officer	University	University	1	Yes	Circumstantially available	Traditional		
Vikas	Diya	35	35	Cook	No occupation	Vocational	Secondary	4	Yes	Circumstantially available	Traditional		
Dorian	Jade	33	35	Construction technician	No occupation	Vocational	Vocational	1	Yes	Circumstantially available	Traditional		
Rayane	Lina	29	28	Engineer	Engineer	University	University	1	No	Circumstantially available	Traditional		
Nelson	Manon	40	39	Tattoo Artist	Teacher	Vocational	University	1	Yes	Circumstantially available	Egalitarian		
Aurélien	Emeline	30	30	Receptionist	No occupation	University	Vocational	1	Yes	Circumstantially available	Egalitarian		
Maxence	Elodie	34	37	Journalist	No occupation	University	University	1	No	Circumstantially available	Egalitarian		
Frédéric	Juliette	37	37	School teacher	Musician	University	University	1	No	Circumstantially available	Egalitarian		
Loïc	Solange	33	32	Electrician	Laboratory technician	Vocational	Vocational	1	No	Circumstantially available	Egalitarian		
Guillaume	Lucie	29	33	Programmer	Marketing manager	University	University	1	Yes	Deliberately available			
Thomas	Maéva	35	31	Community manager	Public servant	Secondary	University	1	Yes	Deliberately available			
Lorice	Laeticia	40	38	Developer	Lawyer	University	University	1	Yes	Deliberately available			
Etienne	Margaux	33	31	Consultant	Sales director	University	University	1	Yes	Unavailable			
Thimotée	Oriane	42	39	Lighting director	Programming manager	University	University	1	Yes	Unavailable			
Bastien	Pauline	39	39	Journalist	Journalist	University	University	2	Yes	Unavailable			
Ludovic	Lucie	28	28	Plumber	Baker	Vocational	Vocational	2	Yes	Unavailable			
Henri	Sofia	25	25	Analyst	Analyst	University	University	1	Yes	Unavailable			
Tom	Elisa	31	30	General foreman	Marketing manager	University	University	1	Yes	Unavailable			
Tristan	Léa	28	26	Quantity surveyor	School supervisor	University	University	1	Yes	Unavailable			
Benjamin	Laurine	37	37	Developer	Executive officer	University	University	2	Yes	Unavailable			
Arthur	Gabrielle	30	30	Farm worker	Seller (part-time)	Vocational	Vocational	1	Yes	Unavailable			
Corentin	Fanélie	24	24	Locksmith	Nurse (part-time)	Secondary	Secondary	1	Yes	Unavailable			

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## Information in German

### Deutscher Titel

Untersuchung von COVID-19-Lockdowns im Rahmen von unerwartetem Elternurlaub: Ein Schock, verschiedene Geschlechterideologien

### Zusammenfassung

**Fragestellung:** Diese Studie untersucht, wie Männer, die während eines Lockdowns im Jahr 2020 in Frankreich Väter eines Neugeborenen geworden sind, auf die Tatsache reagiert haben, dass sie länger als geplant zu Hause geblieben sind.

**Hintergrund:** Frühere Untersuchungen haben ergeben, dass Väter, die einen längeren Elternurlaub nehmen, sich stärker zu Hause engagieren, dass aber Männer, die diese Arbeitsregelungen planen, stärker auf die Gleichstellung der Geschlechter ausgerichtet sind. Aufgrund des COVID-19-Ausbruchs waren Väter mit unterschiedlichen Geschlechterideologien gezwungen, mit ihrem Baby zu Hause zu bleiben.

**Methode:** 42 Querschnittinterviews wurden mit 23 Vätern vor und nach der Geburt ihres Kindes durchgeführt. 10 dieser Väter haben ihre Erwerbstätigkeit in den ersten zwei Monaten nach der Geburt aufgrund von Distanzierungsmaßnahmen unerwartet eingestellt. Diese Gruppe wird mit 10 anderen verglichen, die höchstens 14 Tage bezahlten Urlaub genommen haben, bevor sie ihre Arbeit wieder aufnahmen, und mit 3 anderen, die geplant hatten, einen Monat Urlaub zu nehmen. Alle Mütter waren im Mutterschaftsurlaub.

**Ergebnisse:** Durch Lockdowns wurden Paare von der Hilfe der Großfamilie isoliert, und die Väter mussten die Pflege übernehmen. Für jeden Vater bedeutete das Zuhausebleiben jedoch etwas anderes. Für einige bedeutete dies, dass sie sich die unbezahlte Arbeit gleichmäßig aufteilen mussten. Für andere ging es eher um die Bindung zum Baby, während die intensive Kinderbetreuung als Aufgabe der Mutter angesehen wurde.

**Schlussfolgerung:** Ausgehend von einem *integrativen Ansatz* (Risman 2004, 2018) legen die Ergebnisse nahe, dass Veränderungen auf institutioneller Ebene, wie beispielsweise Lockdowns, sich je nach Geschlechterideologie auf individueller Ebene unterschiedlich auf die Entwicklung der Vaterschaftsrolle auswirken.

**Schlagwörter:** Vaterschaft, Kinderbetreuung, Hausarbeit, Elternzeit, Frankreich

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Alix Sponton: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3219-4156>



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