

# **How Does Policy Matter? Fathers' Use of Parental Leave in Germany 1999-2007**

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## **Abstract**

This paper studies fathers' use of parental leave in Germany for the years 1999-2007. Our main research question is how education influences men's chances to take leave and how the family policy reform of 2007 has changed this relationship. On the one hand, studies show that highly educated men have more liberal gender role attitudes. Therefore one would expect that highly educated fathers are more likely to reduce their working time to take parental leave. On the other hand, their high opportunity costs might prevent them to take leave. Using the German microcensuses of the years 1999-2007 we examine the determinants of men's take-up of parental leave. Our results show that before the reform men's education did not have a significant impact on parental leave usage of men. After the reform, all men have become more likely to be on leave. However, the increase was strongest for highly educated men.

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## **1 Introduction**

Fathers and their contribution to the care of children have become more and more a focus of media and research in the last years. In Germany, particularly the reform of the parental leave benefit system has launched discussions about fathers' and mothers' roles in the family. For decades the (western) German family policy has been dominated by the assumption of a male breadwinner model. Among other policy measures, as a tax-system that favoured the one-earner family and a low provision of childcare in western Germany, this model was supported by a long parental leave and a benefit that was paid as a low flat rate. In this context mainly women used parental leave.

In 2007 Germany introduced a new parental leave benefit scheme that is related to previous earnings. The clear purpose behind this reform has not only been to increase fertility but also women's labor market attachment by a faster return into employment. Furthermore, the new benefit aims to set a stronger financial incentive for fathers to use parental leave (Deutscher Bundestag 2006; Erler 2009). This policy reform represents a shift from the orientation towards the male breadwinner model that has dominated the western German family policy for decades.

The aim of this paper is to investigate how the benefit reform of 2007 has affected fathers' use of parental leave. We are particularly interested in how the relationship in leave-taking behavior has changed with the policy reform and which groups of the society were mostly affected in their behavior by the reform. In particular, we address the question if we can observe behavioral changes for highly educated men for whom the policy changes entailed strong reductions in their opportunity costs of taking time off.

## **2 Men's decision to use parental leave: theoretical perspectives**

The decision to take parental leave has frequently conceptualized as a function of the opportunity costs incurred (a) due to forgone income (b) a devaluation of human capital and (c) missed out career opportunities during the parental leave period. From this, it has been followed that high earnings and a steep earning profile should be related to a low propensity to take time off to care for children. As this argument has been mainly made for women, the general conclusion from this line of thought has been that highly educated women should reduce their time away from employment and reenter into the labor market faster than other women (Gangl and Ziefle 2009). For men, the same logic

should hold. However, researchers who have tried to explain men's parental leave decisions have usually been based on bargaining models, and thus integrated the household context into the argumentation.

According to the bargaining approaches, the allocation of time to market work and household activities is a product of intra-family negotiations. In these models, the result of the bargaining outcome is determined by the resources which the bargaining partners have when they enter negotiations. The person with the greatest resources will have greater bargaining power, which, in turn, puts him or her in a better position to avoid unpleasant activities, such as housework and childrearing. The predictions from these models are that the person with the higher human capital endowment will work in the labour market (Lundberg and Pollak 2003; Amilon 2007). Both approaches suggest that education has a negative impact on fathers' use of parental leave.

However, it is disputable whether one can subsume the care of children under household labor. Childcare might be regarded as a much more emotionally rewarding than housework and it has therefore been suggested to distinguish conceptually between both tasks (Craig 2006; Sundström and Duvander 2002; Deutsch et al 1993; Mannino and Deutsch 2007). This aspect is important since it points to the fact that parenthood is shaped by 'the logic of appropriateness' (March and Olsen 1989) meaning that views on employment and caring behavior are determined by cultural views on social constructions of motherhood, fatherhood and childhood (Pfau-Effinger 2004).

## **Cultural Context**

The cultural constraints to employment decisions and the cultural construction of 'appropriate parenthood' are at the very heart of sociology research. It has been shown that employment decisions are influenced by a complex interplay between family policies and cultural constraints (Duncan and Edwards 1997; Duncan et al. 2003; Pfau-Effinger 2004; Kremer 2007). Further, it has been argued that parents' employment decision are based on 'gendered moral rationalities' (Duncan and Edwards 1997; Duncan et al. 2003). These 'gendered moral rationalities' exist as a reality *sui generis* and have a stronger grip on behavior than financial incentives and disincentives set by the welfare state. The influence of the welfare state to change behavior is regarded as rather modest. Instead, welfare state policies are rather considered as 'moral agents' or 'cultural catalysts' since they reproduce moral images that are predetermined culturally. These moral images have been coined as 'ideals of care' by Kremer (2007: 21).

The German parental leave benefit system until 2006 was in line with an ‘ideal of care’ that regarded women as the main care givers and fathers as the main breadwinners. As such, German policies not only reflected ‘ideals of care’, but reproduced them. This paradigm has, however, eroded with the new reform, particularly as ‘daddy months’ were introduced that were reserved for fathers only (see below). In this sense, the new reform set the stage for fundamental shifts of the ‘ideals of care’.

Apart from policies, particular groups in the society might be a propeller of change in the dominant ‘ideals of care’ or ‘gendered moral rationalities’. It can be assumed that ‘gendered moral rationalities’ vary between social groups within a society (Duncan and Edwards 1997, 2003). Value change theory predicts that the highly educated are the forerunners of new ideas and more gender-egalitarian values (Inglehart 1997; Lesthaeghe and Neidert 2006; Scarbrough 1998). Buttressed is this way of thinking by empirical investigations on attitudes towards the gender division of labor that show that education is positively associated with approving an equal division of labor between men and women (Alwin et al. 1992; Bolzendahl and Myers 2004; Brewster and Padavic 2000; Hofäcker 2007). .

### **3 Parental leave policy in Germany before and after the reform**

Although higher educated men might have more liberal gender role attitudes and hence are more interested in reducing their working time to care for their children the question is whether the economic circumstances allow them to do this. Their attitudes might be in conflict with the fact that they are also able to earn high incomes on the labor market. Particularly in the German context where the gender wage gap is one of the highest in western countries (Sigle-Rushton and Waldfogel 2007) this fact is highly relevant since usually men are the main breadwinners.

Parental leave policies play an important role in this regard since they allow parents to leave the labor market temporarily to care for their children. In the following paragraph the legal regulation on parental leave and parental leave benefits in Germany are outlined:

Parental leave was introduced in Germany in 1986. For the first time fathers were granted the right to reduce their working time for a certain time to care for their children. Before 1986 only maternity leave existed which fathers were not eligible to use. The right to parental leave includes the protection against dismissal and the right to return to the workplace after leave. The length of leave was extended bit by bit over the

years, from 10 months in 1986 to 36 months in 1992. In fact, Germany has one of the longest parental leaves in Europe which promotes a traditional division of labor (Hook 2006). The benefit that was paid was constant over the years: parents received a flat rate payment of 600 DM/300 euros per month for 2 years or 900 DM/450 euros per month for 1 year<sup>3</sup>. However, although the length of leave was extended in 1992 the benefit was only paid for a maximum period of 24 months. The benefit was means-tested and dependent on the household income. After the introduction of the parental leave benefit in 1986 the income thresholds were quite high but they were reduced to lower levels over time.<sup>4</sup>

These benefit regulations can be regarded as part of a family policy which took for granted that women were supported by a male breadwinner after maternity since the financial compensation during leave was by far not adequate to maintain a livelihood. This “male breadwinner policy” was further supported by a tax system that favors the one earner family and low levels of childcare provision for young children in western Germany. The low level of payment has also often been considered as being accountable for men’s low take-up rates during the twenty years this policy was in place since in most cases the loss of the man’s income would have been more severe for the family income than if the mother used parental leave (Beckmann 2001; Vaskovics and Rost 1999).

In 2007 the benefit system was reformed. Since then parents have been eligible to 67 % of their former net income for 14 months after the birth of their children. Two months are reserved for each partner; if they are not used the couple loses them. These ‘daddy months’ that have already been in place in most Scandinavian countries since the 1990s are new in the German parental leave system and aim to encourage fathers’ care commitment. The new payment scheme also makes parental leave for fathers more attractive since the financial compensation is more adequate than before the reform. Particularly, highly educated fathers should have been more encouraged to use leave since the reform. This is also the main hypothesis that we will put to the test in the following.

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<sup>3</sup> The option to receive a higher benefit of 450 euros per month for one year was introduced in 2001.

<sup>4</sup> Between 1986 and 2000 income limits for couples were 15,032 € net income per year (BMJFFG 1989: 32), between 2001 and 2003 51,130 € for the first six months and 16,470 € from the seventh month (BMFSFJ 2002: 74). From 2004 until 2006, the income limits were drastically reduced to 30,000 Euro per year for the first six months (BMFSFJ 2006: 78).

## 4 Previous studies

Most studies that investigate the use of parental leave among fathers have been conducted for the Nordic countries (Sundström and Duvander 2002; Duvander et al. 2008; Byrgen and Duvander 2006; Lappegard 2008; Duvander and Jans 2008; Lammi-Taskula 2008). They show that the introduction of the paternity quota in Sweden (the so-called “daddy months”) had a very positive effect of men’s use of parental leave although fathers still use shorter periods of leave than mothers (Björnberg 2002; Sundström and Duvander 2002).

Regarding the effect of education these studies mainly find a positive effect. Investigating Norwegian fathers’ use of leave Lappegard (2008) finds a positive effect for mothers’ as well as for fathers’ education. Using a Swedish survey conducted in 1986, Näsman (1992) finds that fathers who used at least one month of leave were significantly more highly educated than fathers who did not take any leave. Sundström and Duvander (2002) report similar findings for Sweden, however, in their model the impact of male education on men’s parental leave take is only positive after controlling for earnings.

Investigating a sample of Finnish fathers who took at least some leave, Lammi-Taskula (2008) investigates the take-up of long parental leave and does not find a significant effect of relative education. However, she finds that the mother’s socio-economic characteristics are more important than the fathers. According to her study, the female partner’s occupational position has a positive effect on fathers’ leave-taking but there is no effect of the father’s occupational status. Introducing variables that reflect the gender ideology of the father she finds that a gender egalitarian ideology has a strong positive impact on fathers’ use of leave.

Additionally, workplace characteristics have found to influence fathers leave-taking behavior (Näsman 1992; Bygren and Duvander 2006; Haas et al 2002). Bygren and Duvander (2006) show that fathers who work in the private sector, at small workplaces and in male-dominated workplaces are less likely to use parental leave.

Haas et al (2002) do not find a significant effect of the father’s or the mother’s education on father’s leave-taking behavior. They argue that the organizational culture of the company the man works in and the mother’s attitude towards the sharing of leave are more important than education.

For Germany there are only a few studies that investigate the topic of fathers and parental leave. Before the implementation of the new parental leave benefit there were mainly studies on men's attitudes towards the use of parental leave (Vaskovics and Rost 1999; Beckman 2001; Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach 2005). All of these studies found that worries about the loss of income and career disadvantages were the main barrier for men unwillingness to use leave.

With the implementation of the parental leave benefit reform the topic has become more prominent among researchers. Four recent German studies have investigated the use of leave among fathers under the new law:

A study commissioned by the family ministry (BMFSFJ 2008) investigated the determinants of fathers' use of parental leave after the parental leave reform. They found positive effects of father's education and age as well as mother's employment before childbirth. However, as the authors themselves state, the drawback of the study is that the data on men are less reliable since it was women who were asked about their partners' behaviour and many did not answer the questions on their partner's employment.

The study by Pfahl and Preuyß (2009) shows similar results. Based on a non-representative online-survey with fathers who received parental leave benefits according to the new benefit scheme starting in 2007, they find that these fathers are to a large share highly educated, have a high occupational status and most of them have an employed female partner. The study also shows that work-place characteristics play an important role. A large share of fathers in the survey is employed in the public sector and works in firms with a work council. However, the authors do not compare the periods before and after the introduction of the parental leave benefit reform.

Using data from a German non-representative online-survey Vogt and Pull (2010) find that men with a higher income and a higher education than their partners are less likely to use parental leave. Modern gender role attitudes positively influence fathers' leave-taking behavior. Furthermore, the authors show that men's chances to use leave significantly increased in 2007.

Reich (2010) uses data from the German microcensus to investigate the determinants of fathers' take-up of parental leave after the reform of the parental leave benefit scheme in 2007. She finds a u-shaped effect for men's education but no significant effect for the relative education of the partners. Furthermore, she also finds that workplace

characteristics of the man and his female partner as the firm size and the type of contract are important for fathers' decision of leave-taking.

## **5 Data, method and variables**

### **5.1 Data**

We use the German microcensus of the years 1999 to 2007 to analyze fathers' use of parental leave. The microcensus is a 1 % sample of the population living in Germany. It has been conducted in western Germany since 1957 and in eastern Germany since 1991. The survey was conducted once a year until 2004, but since 2005 households have been surveyed throughout the whole year.

Our analysis is restricted to the period 1999-2007. This restriction is made because earlier microcensuses did not include precise information on the use of parental leave, and later microcensuses are not yet available. Furthermore, we restrict the analysis to men between the ages 18 to 45 who have a child under age three who lives in the same family unit.

We exclude unemployed and inactive fathers from our sample since we cannot identify whether they have been eligible for parental leave or not when the child was born because the microcensus does not provide employment histories. Therefore we have to assume that respondents who were not employed at the time of interview were not eligible for leave when the child was born. Furthermore we exclude the small proportions of single fathers (0.6 %) and fathers in homosexual unions (less than 0.1 %) from the sample.

The total sample size consists of 109,217 respondents. Out of this number 589 fathers are on parental leave, which is 0,5 percent.

### **5.2 Method**

We use a logistic regression. The dependent variable is whether a father is on parental leave or not. In our study, we pool the microcensuses 1999-2007. The microcensus is a rotating panel in which a fourth of the sample is replaced every year, which means that households stay in the sample for four years. This implies that some respondents might be included several times in the study. However, we cannot account for this since the information on who is repeatedly interviewed is not provided in the data. However, we



conducted several checks for the robustness of our results, in which we only included survey years that were at least four years apart. The results were very much in line with the results reported in this paper.

### **5.3 Variables**

The central independent variables are education and the relative education of the partners. For education we distinguish between men without a degree, men with a vocational degree and men with a university degree. For the variable relative education we distinguish men who live in partnerships where both partners have no degree, both have a vocational degree, both have a university degree, where the man has a higher education than his partner and men with a higher educated partner. Besides the relative education we also include the relative age of the partners: we distinguish men whose partners are 0-1 years younger or older, 2-6 years younger, 7 years or more years younger, 2-6 years older or 7 or more years older.

We control for individual characteristics as age (18-25 years, 26-30 years, 31-35 years, 36-40 years, 41-45 years), region (eastern or western Germany) and nationality (German or non-German). We control whether a man is married or lives in a non-marital union. We include two variables that represent workplace characteristics: the sector (public or private sector) and the type of contract (temporary, permanent, self-employed). Moreover, we control for the child's characteristics. We distinguish fathers with only one child, two children and three or more children. Previous research has shown that the birth order of the child has a significant negative effect on fathers' use of leave (Lappegard 2008; Sundström and Duvander 2002). In addition we control for the age of the youngest child (below 1 year, 1 year, 2 years). A further variable controls for the sex of the youngest child (1 girl, 1 boy, multiples).

## **6 Results**

*Table 1* shows the results of the three logistic regression models. In model 1 the respondent's personal characteristics are included, model 2 contains the relative education and the partner's age. In model 3 the age differences between the partners are controlled for. In addition, we estimated two other models in which we interact calendar time with education and the relative education respectively.

In model 1 we can observe that fathers from eastern Germany are more likely to be on leave than their western German counterparts. Men with a non-German nationality are less likely to be on leave than Germans. Age has a positive impact on the chances to use leave. Particularly men between 41 and 45 years are more likely to use leave than young fathers. Fathers who have only one child are more likely to be on leave than fathers with more children.

We do not find a significant effect for the sex of the youngest child but fathers whose youngest children are multiples have a significant higher chance of being on leave than fathers who have only one young child. Regarding the age of the youngest child no significant difference can be found for men with a child of one year and below one year. However, men with 2-year-old children are less likely to be on parental leave. Furthermore, we find a positive impact for fathers in non-marital unions which is contrary to findings from the Nordic countries (Lappegard 2008; Sundström and Duvander 2002). Workplace characteristics have a significant impact as well. Men with temporary contracts as well as freelancers are less likely to use parental leave while fathers employed in the public sector have higher chances to be on leave. Regarding the time period, we find a significant increase in men's chances to use parental leave in the year 2007 that stays stable in all three models. Men's education does not show a significant impact in the first model.

If we include the relative education of the partners (model 2) it can be observed that this factor plays a major role for father's use of leave. Men who hold a university degree with likewise educated women have a significantly higher chance of using leave in comparison to men with a vocational degree whose partners have the same education.

Men who are lower educated than their female partners are more likely to be on parental leave, while men with a higher education than their partners are significant less likely on leave.

In model 3 we added the age differences between the partners. It shows that men with older partners are more likely to be on leave than those who have a partner of the same age.

Table 1: Logistic regression models, odds ratios, dependent variable: using/not using parental leave

	<b>Model 1</b>		<b>Model 2</b>		<b>Model 3</b>	
	Exp(B)	Sig.	Exp(B)	Sig.	Exp(B)	Sig.
<b>Year</b>						
1999-2000	0.80	*	0.83		0.83	
2001-2003	0.88		0.89		0.89	
2004-2006	1		1		1	
2007	1.41	***	1.38	**	1.38	**
<b>Region</b>						
Western Germany	1		1		1	
Eastern Germany	1.39	***	1.36	***	1.37	***
<b>Nationality</b>						
German	1		1		1	
Non-German	0.71	**	0.75	*	0.74	*
<b>Age</b>						
18-25	0.56	***	1.06		0.53	***
26-30	0.59	***	0.75	**	0.57	***
31-35	1		1		1	
36-40	1.00		0.88		1.09	
41-45	1.38	**	1.10		1.74	***
<b>Partnership status</b>						
married	1		1		1	
cohabiting	1.50	***	1.53	***	1.51	***
<b>Education</b>						
no degree	1.12					
vocational degree	1					
university	1.00					
n/a	0.75					
<b>Number of children under age 18</b>						
1 child	1		1		1	
2 children	0.67	***	0.66	***	0.66	***
3 or more children	0.43	***	0.43	***	0.43	***
<b>Age of youngest child</b>						
0	1		1		1	
1	0.94		0.93		0.93	
2	0.60	***	0.59	***	0.59	***
<b>Sex of youngest child</b>						
1 boy	1		1		1	
1 girl	0.89		0.89		0.89	
Multiples	2.08	***	2.02	***	2.03	***
<b>Type of contract</b>						
temporary	0.53	***	0.525	***	0.51	***
permanent	1		1		1	
self-employed	0.54	***	0.50	***	0.50	***
n/a	4.78	***	4.76	***	4.73	***
<b>Sector</b>						
public	1.43	***	1.35	***	1.37	***
private	1		1		1	

Table 1 (continued): Logistic regression models, odds ratios, dependent variable: using/not using parental leave

	<b>Model 1</b>		<b>Model 2</b>		<b>Model 3</b>	
	Exp(B)	Sig.	Exp(B)	Sig.	Exp(B)	Sig.
<b>Education &amp; Partner's education</b>						
both no degree			0.89		0.86	
both vocational degree			1		1	
both university degree			1.45	***	1.45	***
woman < man			0.52	***	0.51	***
woman > man			2.44	***	2.44	***
n/a			0.74		0.74	
<b>Partner's age</b>						
18-25			0.40	***		
26-30			0.84			
31-35			1			
36-40			1.18			
41-45			1.65	**		
<b>Age difference between the partners</b>						
Partner same age 0-1 year younger/older					1	
Partner 2-6 years younger					0.94	
Partner 7 or more years younger					0.58	***
Partner 2-6 years older					1.64	***
Partner 7 or more years older					1.69	*
<b>Model summary</b>						
Log likelihood (starting model)	7327		7327		7327	
Log likelihood (final model)	7120		6974		6970	
Number of cases	109,217		109,217		109,217	
Number of positive events	589		589		589	

Notes: The sample consists of men between age 18-45 who are head or partner of the head of a family and live with at least one child under age 3 in the family. Only men in heterosexual relationships are included.

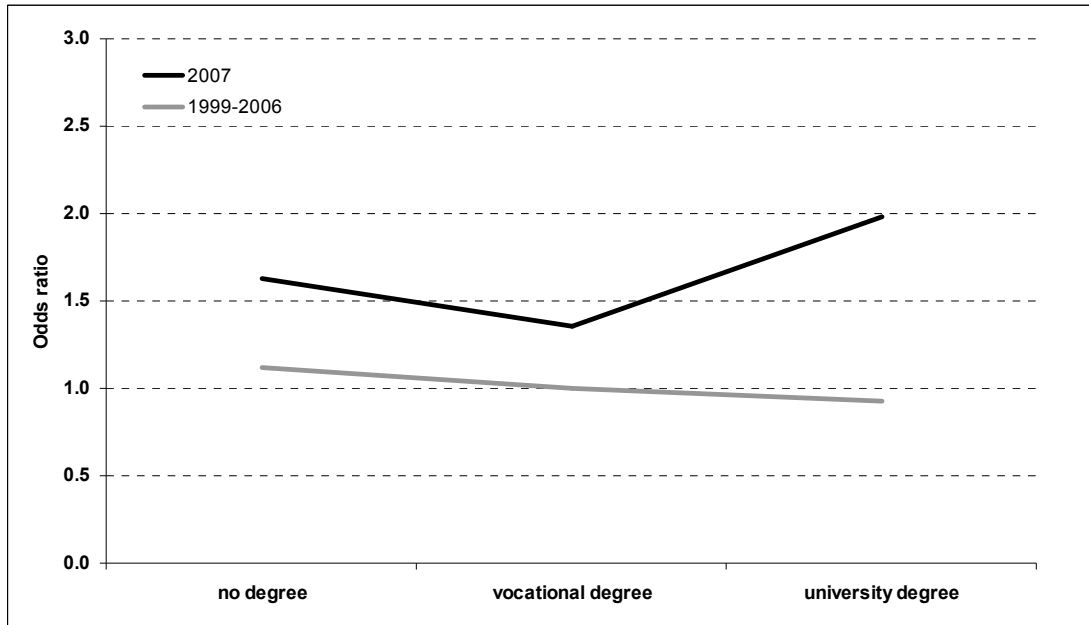
Source: German microcensus 1999-2007, own estimations.

To investigate the impact of the policy reform in 2007 we estimated the same models with an interaction between the education and time as well as time and relative education respectively (*figure 1* and *2*).

In general, men's chances to use parental leave have increased for all educational groups. However, the increase is strongest among the highly educated men (*figure 1*).

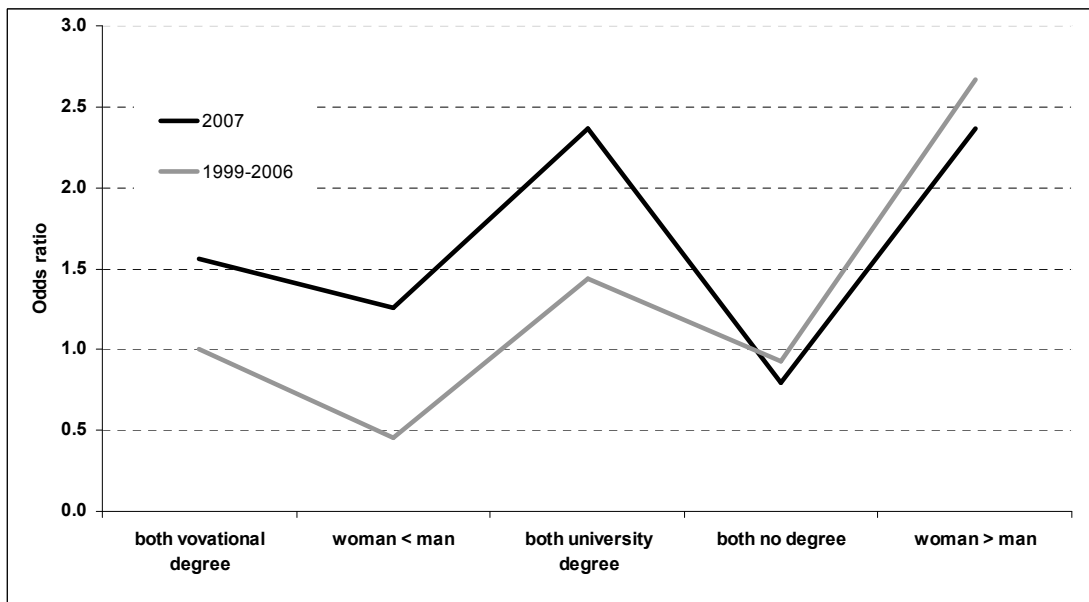
Regarding the relative education and its interaction with time (*figure 2*) we can observe that in 2007 the odds for three groups of men have increased in comparison to the period 1999 to 2006: men with a vocational degree with a similar educated partner, men who are higher educated than their partners and particularly men with a university degree whose partner is highly educated as well. In contrast, fathers without a degree whose partners do also not have degree are less likely to use parental leave in 2007. The same applies to men who are lower educated than their female partners.

Figure 1: Use of parental leave among fathers in Germany, interaction between time and education, odds ratios



Note: Reference category: 1999-2006, vocational degree  
Source: German microcensus 1999-2007, own estimations.

Figure 2: Use of parental leave among fathers in Germany, interaction between time and relative education, odds ratios



Note: Reference category: 1999-2006, both vocational degree  
Source: German microcensus 1999-2007, own estimations.

## 7 Summary and discussion

The aim of our study was to investigate the determinants of fathers' use of leave, particularly the effect of education on leave-taking-behavior.

Our results show that the reform of the parental leave benefit system had a positive impact on fathers' leave taking behavior in general. Men's chances to use leave were significantly higher in 2007 than in the period 1999 to 2006. Distinguishing by educational groups it could be observed that particularly the odds for fathers with a high education have increased.

Obviously, the low flat rate benefit during the time before 2007 discouraged particularly highly educated men to use leave since their income loss would have been very high due to their high earning potential. Also the fact that workplace characteristics as the type of sector and the type of contract have a significant influence on fathers' use of leave supports the finding that economic circumstances are important for the decision of leave-taking. Another finding which supports this interpretation is that the impact of the "relative resources" is much stronger in the period before the reform than in 2007. Although there are still strong differences between the groups, in comparison to the period 1999 to 2006 they have weakened. Particularly the highly educated men with likewise qualified female partners show elevated odds as well as men with a higher education than their partners. These are the groups of men for whom the former flat rate benefit set the lowest incentive and who now benefit the most from the new income-related benefit. By granting highly educated fathers with higher incomes a true option of using leave the new benefit has weakened the strong impact of the relative resources that could be observed until 2006.

Our general conclusion from this study is that the introduction of the new parental leave scheme enabled highly educated men to live up to their more liberal gender role attitudes. This suggests that gender roles attitudes matter. However, changes in gender role attitudes alone are only unable to fuel behavioral change, if the economic dimension that governs behavior is not considered. In this sense our research strongly opposes the findings by Duncan and Edwards (1997) that economic constraints are "sub-ordinate" to explaining behaviour. If we want to understand changes in men's behaviour, it is indispensable to account for the tension between "liberal gender role values" and "economic necessities".

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