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Abstract

This study explores the role that supervisors play in the low uptake of flexible work arrangements amongst fathers in France. We draw on 28 interviews with fathers who had requested access to flexible work arrangements and reported on the reaction of their supervisors. These supervisors were all fathers themselves and had previously benefited from such arrangements themselves but did not grant such policies to other fathers. To understand these unexpected findings, we conducted an additional 16 interviews with supervising fathers in organizations who had previously enjoyed similar flexible work arrangements. The findings show that supervising fathers can act as barriers for other fathers in their organizations who try to push for more gender equality. We identified four ways in which supervisors tend to dissuade fathers to access policies to which they are entitled: gender-role confirming discourses; career threats; practical reasons as a justification and a lack of paternal workplace support. The findings highlight the role of men (in this case, supervising fathers) in the lack of increasing gender equality at work. By showing that fathers can function as 'paternal supervisor gatekeepers' for other fathers in their organizations, we open up new fruitful ways for studying gender equality in organizations.

Introduction

Research shows that working fathers increasingly want to be involved in their family lives and strive for a more egalitarian division of care (Fletcher, 2020). Modern fathers are widely positioned as undertaking an increasingly involved role in family work than in previous generations, navigating through the terrain of both family and employment (Burnett, Gatrell, Cooper & Sparrow, 2013; Connolly, Aldrich, O'Brien, Speight & Poole, 2016). Contemporary fathers are frequently depicted as breaking away from more traditional conceptualisations of them in the role of 'secondary' parent within the family, with a primary association to the workplace and 'breadwinning' (Haas & Hwang, 2019). Furthermore, societal expectations of 'good fathering' are now purported to be intertwined with a more involved style of parenting than previously (Fletcher, 2020; Randles, 2018). The international policy agenda can be observed to be supportive of the shift towards a more equal division of family work, with policies to support fathers in the workplace and workplace incentives for paternal involvement in caregiving increasingly offered by governments (Brandth & Kvande, 2019b; Haas & Hwang, 2019). This is not surprising given the many benefits for children who have involved fathers, such as increased cognitive competence, increased levels of empathy and less sex-stereotyped beliefs (Cabrera, Shannon & Tamis-LeMonda, 2007; Mallette, O'Neal, Winkelman Richardson & Mancini, 2021). Central to the navigation of dual commitments and responsibilities of work and family is access to Flexible Work Arrangements (FWA), which includes part-time work, a compressed work week, working from home, utilizing leave options (including parental leave) and flexi-time (Borgkvist, Moore, Eliott & Crabb, 2018). Notwithstanding the existence of policies aimed to support fathers within the workplace and the positive impact of involved fathers, academic discourse in the work and family arena points to a variety of barriers facing fathers who are striving to be involved in family work. With several barriers that limit the uptake of such policies have been identified (Brandth & Kvande, 2019a; Haas & Hwang, 2019). For example, maternal gatekeeping (Gaertner, Spinrad, Eisenberg & Greving, 2007), negative career consequences (Tanquerel & Grau-Grau, 2020), a hostile organizational culture (Ewald & Hogg, 2020), a lack of workplace support (Kaufman, 2018) and societal expectations (Birkett & Forbes, 2019) all influence the low uptake of FWA of fathers. However, the mechanisms that drive the lack of uptake of FWAs among fathers are less understood

(Fodor & Glass, 2018) and calls for more research on the organizational constraints that lead to the gap between formal paternity leave rights and actual practice in the French context have been formulated (Gregory & Milner, 2011). In addition, detailed exploration of the impact of supervisor support in obtaining FWA remains underdeveloped, leading to a call for more research on the role that supervisors play in the low uptake of FWAs (Las Heras, Van der Heijden, De Jong & Rofcanin, 2017). As previous research suggests that having a supervisor who has been or currently is in a similar situation helps in the negotiation of FWAs (Galinsky, Maddux, Gilin, & White, 2008; Las Heras et al, 2017), we examine the experience of supervisors who are fathers and who had previously enjoyed work-life balance policies themselves. The present study explores the role of supervisors as fathers strive for greater gender equality. We formulate the following research question: *What, if any, is the role of supervisors who are fathers in the process of accessing FWA for other fathers?*

We draw on two qualitative studies consisting of semi-structured in-depth interviews with working fathers who wish to use FWAs as well as supervising fathers who had previously enjoyed such policies and are now in the position to either grant or deny such policies to other fathers in their organization.

This study is conducted in a French context, which has been identified as a specifically 'rich context' for wider exploration of experiences of fatherhood within organisations due to its historically maternal orientation and high levels of gender inequality (Tanquerel, 2022; OECD, 2020). In an attempt to address this, the French government has increased employment rights with regards to the principle of joint parenting and parental leave schemes and most notable for this study, altered the paternity leave entitlement. In 2021, France extended its paternity leave provision which resulted in all new fathers receiving 3 mandatory leave days at the time of birth, paid for by the employer which has a take up rate of around 70%, in addition to a longer period of paternity leave which entitles fathers to a further 21 days (Tanquerel, 2022). Paternal leave cannot be denied if an employee has been with the organisation for more than a year. Else, the organisation will have to pay a fine of 1500 euros (Labour Code Article 1227-5). For other FWAs such as part-time work, the employer can refuse the demand but has to provide a reasonable justification for the decision. However, it is relevant to note that in practice the impact of such measures has been limited. While up-take of paternity leave has recently improved in France, 55% of women reduce their professional

activity or take time off after the birth of a child, against 12% of father. Only 5% take up the non-compulsory extended paternity leave and only 4% of French fathers work part-time (Tanquerel, 2022; Pailhé, Solaz & Tô, 2018). Moreover, mothers spend twice more time with their children than fathers and despite the increasingly generous policies, the basic gendered division of labour has not changed (Fagnani & Letablier, 2007; Gregory & Milner, 2008). More specifically with regard to FWAs, it has been observed that French employers struggle to go above any average levels of flexibility, with employers tending to offer only government or industry agreed arrangements and trade unions displaying reluctance towards them (Ollier-Malaterre, 2009; Stich, 2020), despite initiatives such as the 'right to disconnect' and weekly working hours of 35 hours (Allen & Overy, 2017).

We make two contributions. First, we add to the body of knowledge on the organizational barriers that hinder or facilitate the uptake of work-life balance policies and practices by pointing at the role of the immediate supervisor who has the power to either grant or deny requests for FWAs. More specifically, we show that supervisors who are fathers and have taken up such policies in the past themselves show a hostile attitude towards other fathers who express the wish to do the same. The findings highlight that their attitudes and behaviours sustain and reinforce gendered roles by shaming them, threatening the young fathers' career prospects or by using practical reasons to incite other fathers to continue work full-time rather than opting for more flexible work arrangements. There was also a lack of paternal workplace support to discourage other father to use the available FWAs. Second, we reveal that fathers in managerial positions can hamper other fathers in their quest for a better work-life balance and call this concept 'paternal supervisor gatekeeping'. Much as the maternal gatekeeping literature highlighted the way in which mothers can be observed to inhibit the involvement of fathers, we posit that other working fathers with some decision-making power can also be a hindrance towards increased gender equality in the workplace.

Next, we highlight theoretical insights informing our study, describe our methodological approach, and present our findings. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of implications for theory and practice.

Theory informing the study

Barriers to involvement for working fathers

At the micro level it has been proposed that a key barrier can be found within the home, and the crucial role that mothers play in the extent to which traditional parental gender norms are adhered to, explicitly regarding the extent that they partake in 'gatekeeping' behaviours (Allen & Hawkins, 1999). Such 'maternal gatekeeping' can be observed to restrict paternal involvement through gatekeeping practices such as active discouragement of involvement and routinely monitoring or criticizing fathers' involvement, acting as a potential deterrent to paternal involvement and the maintenance of traditional patterns of caregiving within the family (Gaertner et al., 2007). More recently, the notion of gatekeeping has been extended to fathers through the concept of paternal gatekeeping, in which barriers are established by fathers, specifically with regard to discussion around childcare options and their involvement in them (Birkett & Forbes, 2019). This paper explores the concept of parental gatekeeping at the meso level, more precisely, within the organisational context. It builds upon the work of Marynissen and colleagues (2019) who posited that workplace characteristics can act as gatekeepers to parental leave use, in particular for fathers, through either encouraging or discouraging their employees to take leave through informal means despite entitlements (Bygren & Duvander, 2006; Haas & Hwang, 2019; Kaufman, 2018; Moran & Koslowski, 2019; van Breeschoten, 2019). More specifically, it explores the role undertaken by supervisors who are parents in the gatekeeping process which is relevant as previous research is indicative that the individual's family circumstances may influence perceptions of caregivers within the workplace and responds to calls for further research into this dynamic (Las Heras et al., 2017; Kelland, Lewis & Fisher, 2022).

At the meso and macro level, fathers who wish to be actively involved in family work have been found to face barriers such as social mistreatment and stigma, career penalties, social scrutiny and less workplace support (Wayne & Cordiero, 2003; Berdahl & Moon, 2013; Tanquerel & Grau-Grau, 2020; Kelland et al., 2022). Many of these barriers appear to be associated with masculinity and perceptions that such fathers are moving away from what is acceptable behaviour for a 'real man', with breadwinning continuing to be intrinsically linked to masculinity (Dermot, 2008; Williams, 2008). It has been observed that many workplaces continue to be guided by traditionally gendered conceptions regarding the division of paid and family work (Burnett et al., 2013), with fathers who seek greater gender equality in the workplace risking judgements of being viewed as less masculine,

having lower status and respect than men who do not wish to do this and face judgements or disapproval from others (Rudman & Mescher, 2013; Berdahl & Moon, 2013). Additionally, such fathers have been found to be regularly subjected to teasing (Berdahl & Moon, 2013), mocked, viewed with suspicion and considered as idle (Kelland et al., 2022). Some academics have gone as far as to state that fathers seeking gender equality in the workplace encounter prejudice, experience implicit and explicit workplace discrimination and social mistreatment, transmitting an immediate message regarding disapproval (Wayne & Cordiero, 2003; Duffy, Ganster, Shaw, Johnson, & Pagon, 2006; Berdahl & Moon 2013).

A further barrier for fathers when managing both home and family work which has been identified in the literature relates to the impact such a change in working patterns has upon the career of the father. Fathers who have an egalitarian approach to parenting have been found to risk facing 'career death' and judgements of reduced professional competence (Halford, 2006; Brescoll & Ullmann, 2005; Berdahl & Moon, 2013). Naturally, in this context many fathers resist this path due to the potential negative impact on their careers.

The final barrier to involvement in family work for working fathers that has emerged from the existing literature is the concept that fathers obtain less workplace support than mothers and are less likely to access FWAs which can be conceptualised as a central mechanism to enable the management of the two spheres of work and family (Wheatley, 2017; Moran & Koslowski, 2019). Whilst most organisations have policies in place to assist employees in managing their work and home life which is normally underpinned by legislation and purported to be 'gender blind', a perception remains that such policies are primarily associated with mothers rather than fathers (Lewis, 1997; Smithson & Stokoe, 2005; Miller, 2017; Moran & Koslowski, 2019). Researchers have offered lack of awareness of the relevance or applicability of such policies to fathers, perceptions that fathers will be less likely to utilise them and their usage by fathers being incongruent with the established norms of the workplace culture as a potential explanation for low take up (Haas, Allard & Hwang, 2002; Haas & Hwang, 2019). Furthermore, it has been postulated that workplace support for family work is constructed as a potential favour, a maternal privilege that mothers in the workplace receive, which is not afforded to fathers (Lewis, 1997; Gatrell & Cooper, 2016).

This workplace support is invariably a consequence of negotiation, and in this negotiation, fathers have less power than mothers (Bloksgaard, 2015).

Supervision support

Las Heras and colleagues propose that supervisors with personal experience of managing work and family demands are more likely to allow their teams to work more flexibly (they define this as 'schedule i-deals'). With the successful outcome of such negotiations being proposed as contingent on the extent to which each party is able to consider the other persons point of view, which is presented as being more likely if the supervisor has been, or is in, a similar situation (Galinsky et al., 2008; Las Heras et al, 2017). Their findings build upon earlier studies which observed that if a supervisor is perceived as being considerate, demonstrates positive emotions and have 'high-quality exchange relationships' there will be a higher success rate in negotiating FWAs (Hornung, Rousseau, Weigl, Müller & Glaser, 2014; Rofcanin, Kiefer & Strauss, 2017). It is therefore expected that a supervising father who has enjoyed FWAs himself will facilitate the request of other fathers in the organization for policies that help them support work and family demands.

Methodology

We conducted two studies. For Study 1, an interview-based methodology was used to examine the reaction at work when fathers request FWAs. Study 1 consisted of semi-structured interviews with 28 fathers who had asked for such policies in their organizations. Unexpectedly, these interviews revealed that their supervisors seemed to actively discourage them from using available FWAs. Moreover, it was found that those supervisors were often fathers themselves who had taken up FWAs themselves in the past. To further explore this unexpected and counterintuitive finding, we designed a second study. Study 2 consisted of 16 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with fathers in supervising positions that had all accessed FWAs themselves. We aimed to understand the other party's perspective and provide a more complete picture of the reactions fathers get when they ask for FWAs such as part-time work and parental leave. Both studies helped us to identify themes and gather rich insights in the lived

experiences of both fathers and supervising fathers who can grant or hinder the provision of FWAs. Hereunder the characteristics of the sample, the followed procedures and the process of the data analysis are outlined.

Sample and study context

Study 1 participants were recruited through blogs and forums as well as personal contacts. Each interviewee was asked to identify other fathers in organizations who might be interested in participating in the study. This snowball technique has led to the identification of additional interviewees. The sample consisted of 28 fathers. The average age was 35 years, ranging from 22 to 44 years. The interviewees worked in a range of sectors such as financial services, education and health care. They had requested a range of FWAs such as parental leave, part-time work, demotion and working from home. Table 1 outlines the demographic information of the sample.

Insert Table 1 about here

Study 2 comprised of 16 supervising fathers who had the discretion to either deny or grant requests related to flexible working arrangements. Study 2 participants were recruited in the same way as those identified for Study 1. Average age was 42.5, ranging from 36 to 53 years. They had enjoyed the same range of FWAs as the sample of Study 1. Table 2 provides the demographic information of the Study 2 sample.

Insert Table 2 about here

Procedures

In this study, we used a sequential exploratory approach in which we first conducted interviews in Study 1 with fathers, which led to the identification of the paradox in which the supervisors of these fathers were often fathers themselves and had accessed FWAs in the past. In order to explore this further, we conducted a second study that consisted exclusively of supervising fathers who had taken up policies that had allowed them to manage work and

family demands. The interviewees were contacted by the first author and an individual interview was scheduled. All interviews were conducted face-to-face and were tape recorded to allow for verbatim analysis and to maximise the richest of the data (Perakyla, 1997). Anonymity was guaranteed and the interviewees were told they could stop the interview at any time. The interviews were conducted in French and lasted for about 90 minutes. Back-and-forth translation of two bilingual speakers was used to translate the transcripts into English. The number of interviews was not determined beforehand, however, we stopped looking for more interviewees when saturation point was reached. Two interview guides were used. The use of semi-structured interviews provided a systematic procedure for data collection, yet allowed the researchers to follow-up on interviewees' responses for clarity or elaboration purposes (Whittaker, 2009).

Analysis

The interviews were fully transcribed and the analysis was conducted in three inter-related steps. All researchers were involved in the analysis to reduce error and bias in coding the transcripts (Mays & Pope, 2000) and the inter-coder reliability has been established. Cohen's κ was used in order to avoid chance agreement. Several rounds of discussions between the coders, modification of the codebook, coding and calculating the inter-coder reliability were necessary to obtain reliabilities that met the interrater reliability cut-off point of 0.80 (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The analysis was interpretive and iterative in nature and the researchers had to go back and forth between the transcriptions, coding book, literature and additional observational notes that were taken right after each interview was conducted in order not to lose sight of the context in which things were said. Figure 1 below shows how the analysis evolved from the first-order themes to the broader categories and dimensions in the third and last step. This way of presenting the data structure has been developed by Gioia and colleagues (2013). During the first step of the analysis, the entire transcripts were read to get a feel for the data. Then, deductive coding was used to reveal themes in line with our literature review. Some existing barriers identified in previous studies, such as the idea that taking up FWAs would hamper one's future career and the image that individuals who request such policies are uncommitted and unprofessional emerged at this stage. The next phase involved an iterative process of

coding to develop a codebook, which was modified in line with each new transcript. The first-order codes can be found at the left in Figure 1. In the second step of the analysis and after the coding the data, we focused on the connections between the codes and identified higher-order conceptual codes. Here, we utilised a constant comparative method of analysis (Silverman, 2000) where the coding process oscillated between and within first and second-order codes. We moved away from the rather descriptive formulation of first-order codes, where the words of the interviewees themselves were used, to a higher level of abstraction where meaningful themes were created based on the first-order themes (Locke, 2001; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Some of those codes resonated with themes identified in earlier studies such as a hostile organizational culture in the form of a lack of paternal workplace support, while others like gendered discourses did not. The second-order themes can be found in the centre of Figure 1. Together, these second-order concepts were ways in which supervising fathers hinder other fathers to make use of FWAs. The final aggregated theoretical dimension of paternal keeping can be found on the right of Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Findings

The findings report on the perceived negative reactions at work when fathers request FWAs (Study 1) as well as the experiences of fathers in supervising positions that had all accessed FWAs themselves (Study 2). We expected that supervisors who are fathers themselves would help other fathers to enjoy access to FWAs aimed at enhancing gender equality, such as parental leave. Surprisingly, the findings showed a completely different picture. Instead of supporting other fathers in their organizations, they seemed to prevent fathers from accessing such policies through their attitudes and behaviors. These behaviors aligned with the experiences of the fathers who had asked for FWAs in Study 1. More precisely, the supervisors did so in four distinct ways: through gender-role confirming discourses; career threats; the use of practical reasons as a justification and through the lack of paternal workplace support. These four themes are further elaborated on below.

Gender-role confirming discourses

Many young fathers reported on the moment when they announced that their partner was expecting a baby. This announcement, although politely received with some kind words, was usually the beginning of an increase in discourses that they perceived to be gender-role confirming. As one young father explained:

> *He [his superior] was all happy and congratulated me when I told him my wife was expecting. I went home really relieved about his positive reaction and had never thought things would become so awkward after (interviewee 9a).*

The interviewees explained that their supervisors engaged in ways to get the message across that they were not supposed to take advantage of the existing FWAs. While these messages were quite subtle in the beginning, they were increasingly harsh as upcoming fathers continued to show their intention to be involved in the care of the future baby. As one father recalled:

> *I know the policies there are and I do think it's great, so I definitely wanted at least parental leave and then the possibility to work one day from home. It doesn't affect my work at all, so I feel that all parties benefit. I was very surprised when he made it clear that I was not going to have this day working from home (interviewee 7a).*

Some superiors engaged in shaming the fathers who expressed the wish to take an active part in the care of the baby as one interviewee recounted:

> *It's subtle. He tried to dissuade me to be involved with the baby, rolling his eyes each time I left early. All the gestures were aimed to let me know that I should just be at work (interviewee 2a)*

Similarly, the supervisors told the fathers that taking time off work is unprofessional or would signal a lack of commitment that would be negatively perceived in their organization. Basically, they highlighted that they had to conform to the picture of the 'ideal worker' who is completely devoted to work.

> *When I asked to make a downward move, I got this face like 'you're kidding'. I had to explain it wasn't a joke, but a serious request (interviewee 24a).*

In addition, the supervisors did not seem to recognize the wishes of the young fathers in their organizations. As one supervisor interviewee explained:

> *It's nice to be home a bit and see your kids grow up, but it's not their primary role. Work does come first as their salaries are usually higher than their wives'. I think that if they have to make a choice, they would prefer a promotion over a demotion (interviewee 14b).*

The supervisors highlighted that they were not going to encourage the uptake of FWAs. As one supervisor stated:

> *Of course they [fathers] have to ask for it. For future mothers we always mention it as it helps them to balance their upcoming motherhood with work, but for fathers we prefer them to stay fulltime at work so we do not bring it up ourselves (interviewee 6b).*

Career threats

The supervisors threatened the fathers by mentioning repeatedly that using FWAs would have a negative impact on their careers. As one interviewed father reported:

He was very direct and said something like: 'You're keeping your career on track right? You're not going to spoil all this for a baby'. I didn't know what to answer as I actually was going to put my career second for a while (interviewee 3a).

In addition, lowering one's future earning potential was being put forward as a threat:

He mentioned something like 'does your wife realise that if you're more at home, you also earn less and that your earning potential in the future will also be lower?' (interviewee 12a).

Moreover, a negative image or a loss in status were also brought up by the supervisors to threaten the fathers who had requested FWAs. The following quotes illustrate this:

He said to me that although he understood I wanted to be with my family, I should be aware that it will not be well seen by top management and that I would be less likely to get promoted in the future (interviewee 25a).

I got some nasty comments on how others would perceive me as a part-time worker. Come on! He said that if I would take this parental leave, I would never become an associate (interviewee 19a).

Use of practical reasons as a justification

The interviewed fathers reported that their supervisors put forward a range of practical obstacles as a way to justify that taking advantage of FWAs would be a bad idea. For example, they stressed the need for being present at work:

Although many of us can easily work from home so now and then, all of sudden my request was an issue. I don't get it, when a mum asks for it, it's all fine and now it's me and the reaction is like 'oh, you should be around' (interviewee 22a).

He managed to give me all kind of crap excuses like how difficult it would be to set a skype meetings and how good it is for the ambiance and informal gatherings in the cafeteria to be around every single day. He didn't say no, he just highlighted the advantages of being at work rather than at home (interviewee 17a).

The fathers reported that other supervisors emphasized the difficulties involved with part-time work and absences. Here, they mentioned that part-time workers tended to be less committed to work and that being more involved in the care of the children implied not just a day at home but would lead to more absences in the form of staying home with sick kids, medical appointments and leisure activities. As one interviewee recalled:

He told me that being an involved parent was not a great plan in the long run because it wasn't just about babies. He told me that later on things would get worse with activities, play dates, doctor's appointments and that all these things would take a lot of time and would make me less flexible. He said it would be very inconvenient (interviewee 12a).

Interestingly, the supervisors of the fathers in Study 1 were all fathers themselves. Many interviewees mentioned that these supervisors spoke positively about the policies and practices their organization had in place. Moreover, some were known for their position as advocate for more gender equality.

He's the one who always gives those diversity-speeches, who says how much he wants things to change. That we need more women at work and better childcare facilities. It's the kind of guy where you feel lucky that you can start a family under his management. I didn't see this coming (interviewee 5a).

He has a family himself and I know he's been pretty involved when his kids were younger. He's even taken a parental leave of several months, so why would he incite me not to take it? (interviewee 23a).

Lack of paternal workplace support

All the supervisors we interviewed in Study 2 had enjoyed FWAs. We questioned those supervisors about how they handled demands from fathers to benefit from policies and practices to manage both their professional career and their familial responsibilities. Clearly, they did not make the link between what they had had access to themselves and what they could do for other fathers to enjoy the same. As one director explained:

He publicly mentioned my lack of investment, he once called me 'the daddy' to highlight my role as a parent, which all made me feel very unprofessional, which is probably exactly what he wanted (interviewee 22a).

Sure, it was great to have had those few months after the birth of my second child, but as the big boss here I just can't really have people leaving for long periods of time, work part-time of whatever. I mean, I have to keep the thing running (interviewee 12b).

We all know that part-timers are difficult. It's harder to schedule meetings, you have to bring them up-to-date and if they work part-time it's probably because they want to be invested parents and they might be even more absent when the child is ill etcetera. Full-time fathers who just focus on work are much handier (interviewee 11b).

When being confronted by the researcher with the fact that they had themselves benefited from some form of FWA in the past, the following interviewee stressed the business-related needs.

Yes, that's true, but does that imply I should do the same? Every job is different and sometimes it's not the right moment. The environment has changed, it's very competitive. If someone doesn't want to give their 100% I do prefer to take someone else. There are lots of others (interviewee 13b).

The fathers participating in Study 1 highlighted that they had to pro-actively ask for existing policies, which they found annoying. When being asked about this, the supervisors in Study 2 stressed that they considered this to be normal:

I'm not going to say, hey, wouldn't you want to take some parental leave? I'm not crazy. They're entitled to take it, but I'm not going to encourage them! (interviewee 9b).

This is available upon request, the fewer people take it the better it is for the business. I believe that the existence of such policies is already a great chance not every employee has (interviewee 7b).

By not acknowledging the need of young fathers, and by passively discouraging them from using the existing FWAs in their organizations, they sustained and reinforced the lack of paternal workplace support.

To summarize, supervisors who are fathers themselves and who had benefited from FWAs themselves in the past seem to hinder other fathers in the uptake of such arrangements. The findings show that supervisors used gender-role confirming discourses in the form of subtle messages that one is not supposed to take advantage of FWAs, shaming and by depicting them as uncommitted, and unprofessional. In addition, they threatened fathers that they would lose status and income and their careers would stall and used a range of practical reasons to justify their negative attitude towards taking up existing policies that allowed fathers to balance their professional and family

lives. The supervisors also sustained and reinforced the lack of paternal workplace support that discouraged fathers to use FWAs.

Discussion

This study examined the dialogue between working fathers and their supervisors when attempting to access FWAs through in-depth interviews with both fathers and supervisors who had families themselves and had benefitted from such arrangements. Informed by earlier research, we expected that supervisors who were fathers themselves would demonstrate a supportive approach when handling the requests of the subordinate fathers within their team to access FWAs. However, the data revealed the opposite, with supervising fathers being found to actually hinder other fathers who wanted to take a more involved role with their families through accessing FWAs. We contribute to the existing body of knowledge by focusing on the processes by which supervisors translate flexible working policies into practices. In doing so, we illustrate how supervisors' demands for the ideal worker, unencumbered by familial obligations, is achieved through a process of 'paternal supervisor gatekeeping'. The findings point to four ways in which supervisors dissuade fathers from accessing the FWA to which they are entitled: gender-role confirming discourses; career threats; the use of practical reasons as a justification; and the lack of paternal workplace support. These four strategies are discussed in the light of the existing body of knowledge below.

First, regarding gender-role confirming discourses, existing research has acknowledged that whilst most organisations advocate gender-neutrality in their FWAs, the organisational structures in which the policies are embedded are often impacted by gender. With organisational practices routinely guided by workplace norms and expectations that have been previously observed to both build upon and reproduce gender inequality (Acker, 1990; Fodor & Glass, 2018). Specifically, existing research has observed that organisational norms often reinforce the concept of mothers as having a primary association to children, whereas fathers have a primary association to the workplace, strengthening notions of the male ideal worker norm (Fodor & Glass, 2018; Moran & Koslowski, 2019). The data presented here highlight the nature in which full-time working men are assumed to align to the notion of the ideal worker who is 'readily available' and 'unencumbered' by parental status and encouragement to maintain

the parental status quo in this regard was evident (Berns, 2002). Previous research has noted that both supervisors and working parents often assume that FWAs are intended primarily for mothers (Gatrell, Burnett, Cooper, & Sparrow, 2015) thus any association with FWAs can be observed to create misalignment. The ideal worker norm can be seen not only to be prescriptive for women but also to restrict men's abilities to deviate from expected gender norms of parental behaviour, reproducing long-established gender roles and contributing to men's low uptake of FWAs (Atkinson & Hall, 2009). This study expands understanding on the way in which gender roles are confirmed through line manager's discourses within contemporary workplaces in a French context. Illustrating the nature in which supervisors confirm gender-role expectations in ways such as associating fathers who seek FWAs with unprofessionalism and not taking their requests seriously.

Second, regarding career threat, the data illustrate ways in which supervisors partake in dialogue with the fathers in their team regarding the longer-term impact on their careers of accessing FWAs. This is in keeping with existing research in which fathers have noted that taking advantage of their workplace entitlements to care for a dependent child is interpreted as a sign of low commitment towards the job and adversely affects upon their likelihood of being promoted (EHRC, 2009). Similarly, the career threats observed in this study support earlier observations that accessing FWAs are associated with 'career death' and perceptions of reduced competence (Halford, 2006; Brescoll & Ullmann, 2005; Berdahl & Moon, 2013). This study extends existing knowledge by providing detailed insights in the way career threats manifest in a French employment context. Additionally, the concept of supervisors using career threats as a way of discouraging access to FWA is a new direction of research, emphasising the instrumental role played by supervisors in this process. It is pertinent to note that the career threats issued by supervisors in this study did not emerge as supportive, cautionary tales, to assist fathers in the navigation between work and family domains. Rather, they present clearly a threat, which is in contrast with existing knowledge that predicts that supervisors who have been or currently are in a similar situation helps in the successful negotiation of flexible working (Galinsky et al., 2008; Las Heras et al, 2017).

The next theme that emerged from the data presented in this study sheds light on the way in which supervisors justified their lack of support in granting FWAs for fathers on the grounds of practical reasons. Supervisors were

observed to present a myriad of practical obstacles to their subordinates, such as stressing the importance of needing to be present and technological challenges. Such obstacles appeared to be presented as a 'fait accompli' rather than hurdles to be overcome. This research adds to the rapidly extending body of knowledge regarding the barriers that exist for fathers in accessing FWAs in which explanations such as the impact of social mistreatment, stigma and social scrutiny have been previously identified. Such examples of practical hurdles being offered by supervisors to justify discouragement of FWAs is not believed to currently exist as a barrier for either mothers or fathers. This offers a new direction of research by identifying the way that 'paternal supervisor gatekeeping' manifests between fathers and supervisors, which is likely to have a key part to play in the maintenance of traditional patterns of employment for working fathers.

Finally, the lack of paternal workplace support emerged from the findings. Despite benefitting from FWAs themselves, many supervisors in this study were observed to attempt to dissuade access to such arrangements, thus perpetuating an unsupportive paternal organisational culture within their teams. This sustains and reinforces the lack of adequate paternal workplace support. Such supervisory behaviour is likely to result in reduced uptake of FWA's, as they have previously been acknowledged as having a central role in their establishment, especially as they are increasingly becoming more informal and individualized (Fodor & Glass, 2018; Moran & Koslowski, 2019). After all, whilst clear flexible working policies, underpinned by legal regulations widely exist in organisations it is supervisors who put them into practice (Den Dulk, Peper & Sandar, 2011; Dobbin, Kim, & Kalev, 2011). The lack of paternal workplace support manifested in numerous ways within the data, which included the supervisor emphasising difficulties with part time working for their male subordinate, identifying their lack of suitability to such arrangements and more general lack of encouragement. Naturally, supervisors adopting such an approach to the management of requests for FWAs within organisations are likely to have the impact of fathers not feeling supported and predict an unsuccessful application for such arrangements.

Theoretical implications

Our study builds upon and advances previous research by pointing to the importance of gatekeepers in granting (or not) FWAs that fathers are entitled to access (Fodor & Glass, 2018) and the work of Marynissen et al (2019) who highlight the role of workplace factors in gatekeeping, by specifically highlighting the role of supervisors in this process. Our study further contextualizes the effect of supervisor gender on shaping organisational work-family culture as well as gender norms and expectations in the workplace. More specifically, our research findings delineate how not only supervisor gender, but also male supervisor's parental status can affect the access of fathers to FWAs. We build on earlier research on supervisory behaviour (Las Heras et al., 2017) by studying both the perspective of the employee and the supervisor, allowing us to understand the effect of a specific gender combination, in our case male supervisor-male employee on employee use of family-friendly benefits. Further, we reveal the process through which workers negotiate their rights and the way supervisors seek to modify, limit or otherwise evade legal responsibilities that exist to provide fathers support in the workplace. It is proposed that by limiting fathers' ability to take up such policies and practices, supervisors are observed to be systematically disadvantaging fathers who want to be more involved in the care of their children, which can have implications for both parents. Consequently, stereotypical gender roles regarding expectations of engagement in caregiving are not only sustained but even reinforced, maintaining as such gender equality both in the workplace and within the home. These findings reinforce the conclusions of previous studies regarding the gap between formal protections and substantive rights, in which formal entitlements are proposed as necessary but insufficient in granting worker rights without effective enforcement mechanisms (Pedriana & Stryker, 2004). Finally, our study reveals a new concept identified as 'paternal supervisor gatekeeping'. Just like maternal gatekeeping, in which the mother attributes (mainly in an unintentional way) the main care responsibility for children to herself and tries to minimize (equal) sharing with the father (Allen & Hawkins, 1999), fathers who are supervisors can also be conceptualised as gatekeepers for other fathers in organizations. Consequently, it is implied that gendered organizations not only negatively affect women, but also those men who openly challenge and explicitly resist the dominant gender order by preventing access to FWA through 'paternal supervisor gatekeeping' activities (Murgia & Poggio, 2013).

Practical implications

Our findings have important implications for fathers, HR managers and organizations more generally.

The lack of paternal support in organizations in France is worrisome in that it forces fathers to choose between their careers and their families (Gregory & Milner, 2008). However, the availability of FWAs alone is not sufficient. Previous research has shown that gender-neutral policies tend to reinforce the notion of the 'ideal worker' (Kelly, Ammons, Chermack & Moen, 2010). Consequently, FWAs policies that specifically target fathers is an option that could be explored in order to determine whether this would enhance father's uptake. To maximise success in this area, French policy could adopt a strategy identified within UK legislation, namely, that of 'positive action', embedded within The Equality Act (2010) such action makes it lawful to actively encourage underrepresented groups, in this situation fathers, to access FWAs. Another mechanism to enforce the uptake of FWAs amongst fathers is statutory reporting of FWA requests and acceptance rates, akin with gender pay reporting in the UK. At the meso level, access to FWAs can be encouraged through senior management actively role modelling their usage which has been found to be a key tool to improve uptake of family friendly policies (Government Equalities Office, 2020). Additionally, through the establishment of organisational mentoring schemes and fatherhood forums opportunities are provided for fathers to explore the challenges they face in accessing FWAs and how best to overcome them. Moreover, the wider social norms governing care and work need to be taken into consideration as to avoid the situation in which the use of existing FWAs leads to stigmatization or marginalization (Gambles, Lewis & Rapoport, 2006) or where FWAs are available in theory, but where father are discouraged to use it in practice (Borgkvist et al., 2018). This could be achieved within organisations through training targeted at managers to explore management of flexible working requests from fathers and how to specifically support fathers in the workplace.

FWAs present a range of benefits, both for workers themselves, such as increased well-being (Greenhaus, Collins & Shaw, 2003), their families, in the form of a better child-father bond and positive health and development of children (Huerta, Adema, Baxter, Han, Lausten, Lee & Waldfogel, 2013) and finally for organizations, as it leads to reduced absenteeism, higher satisfaction and increased commitment amongst its workers (McDonald, Brown & Bradley, 2005). In addition, men's increased access to FWAs may enhance women's ability to participate in the

workforce while their children are growing up, and improve women's work–life balance. Further, men and women who are satisfied with their work–life balance are likely to be workers that are more productive and happier citizens (Craig & Mullan, 2010). Thus, acknowledgement of the existence and management of 'paternal supervisor gatekeeping' has potential to improve both working and home life for fathers and their families. We know that when fathers perceive their organization to be supportive of their non-work life, they are more likely to strike a positive work-life balance that is not only beneficial for the organization but also leads to a more gender-equal society (Allard, Haas & Hwang, 2011).

Limitations and future research

This study is not without shortcomings. First, our samples are small. Especially the sample of Study 2 that consisted of 16 supervisors only allows us to describe an emerging concept, without making generalizations. More research is needed to examine whether 'paternal supervisor gatekeeping' also exists in other national and organizational contexts. Second, although we attempted to create dyads where the supervisors and the fathers interviewed could be linked to each other, this was unfortunately impossible. Therefore, the samples of Study 1 and Study 2 are separated but point to very similar issues, which can also be seen as a strength. Third, the uptake of FWAs is a negotiation that takes place over time. Future research could adopt a longitudinal design to see how initial resistance of supervisors might change over time as fathers insist.

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Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the sample Study 1

No.	Age	Position	Sector	Size (number of employees)	Work-life balance policy requested
1a	32	Personal Care Assistant	Healthcare	0-50	Parental leave
2a	35	Maintenance technician	Industrial	0-50	Part-time work
3a	38	Project manager	Construction	+200	Parental leave
4a	42	Physiotherapist	Healthcare	50-100	Parental leave and part-time work
5a	28	Nurse	Healthcare	100-200	Part-time work
6a	41	Sports coach	Sport	0-50	Part-time work
7a	39	Software engineer	Manufacturing	50-100	Work one day from home and parental leave
8a	36	Tour operator	Tourism	0-50	Work one day from home
9a	35	Medical billing	Healthcare	50-100	Part-time work
10a	33	Secondary school teacher	Education	0-50	Parental leave
11a	30	Factory manager	Manufacturing	+200	Parental leave and part-time work
12a	27	Dentist	Healthcare	100-200	Part-time work
13a	34	Legal secretary	Legal	0-50	Parental leave and work one day from home
14a	33	Builder	Construction	100-200	Parental leave
15a	35	Barista	Hospitality	0-50	Part-time work
16a	44	Call center	Business services	100-200	Parental leave
17a	32	Financial manager	Financial services	100-200	Work one day from home
18a	30	Book keeper	Accounting	0-50	Work one day from home
19a	40	Lawyer	Legal	0-50	Parental leave
20a	35	Theatre manager	Creative industries	0-50	Parental leave
21a	41	Pharmacist	Healthcare	50-100	Part-time
22a	38	Retail assistant	Retail	50-100	Part-time
23a	35	Civil servant	Governmental	100-200	Parental leave
24a	33	Loan specialist	Financial services	50-100	Demotion
25a	30	Restaurant manager	Retail	0-50	Parental leave and part-time work
26a	31	Special education teacher	Education	0-50	Part-time work
27a	36	Receptionist hotel	Hospitality	100-200	Part-time work
28a	37	Lighting technician	Creative industries	0-50	Parental leave

Table 2: Demographic characteristics of the sample Study 2

No.	Age	Number of children	Parental status	Position	Sector	Size (number of employees)	Work-life balance policy requested	Work-life balance policy used
1b	48	2	Married	Department Head	Education	100-200	Work from home	Part-time work
2b	44	3	Married	Factory supervisor	Manufacturing	100-200	Parental leave and part-time work	Work from home
3b	53	2	Married	Head master	Education	50-100	Parental leave	Part-time work
4b	38	2	Married	Bar manager	Hospitality	0-50	Part-time work	Demotion
5b	45	4	Divorced and remarried	Associate lawyer	Legal	0-50	Parental leave	Part-time work
6b	48	3	Married	Head of Human Resources	Financial services	+200	Work one day from home and part-time work	Part-time
7b	42	2	Married	Owner of construction company	Construction	50-100	Parental leave	Part-time work
8b	40	1	Married	Manager	Tourism	50-100	Work from home	Parental leave
9b	36	2	Divorced	Owner of a pharmacy	Healthcare	0-50	Part-time	Parental leave
10b	39	1	Married	Theater manager	Creative industries	0-50	Parental leave	Work from home
11b	38	3	Married	Accountant	Accounting	0-50	Work one day from home	Part-time work
12b	41	2	Married	Hotel manager	Hospitality	50-100	Part-time work	Part-time work
13b	40	2	Married	Editor	Publishing	0-50	Parental leave	Parental leave
14b	46	2	Married	Consultant	Consulting	0-50	Demotion	Work from home
15b	42	2	Married	Shop owner	Retail	0-50	Part-time	Part-time
16b	41	4	Married	Doctor	Healthcare	+200	Part-time	Parental leave

Figure 1: Data analysis structure

-Subtle messages that one is not supposed to take advantage of FWAs. Shaming fathers who wish to benefit from FWAs. -Depicting them as uncommitted, and unprofessional.	→ Gender-role confirming discourses	
-Threatening that their careers will stall. -Threaten with a loss of status. -Threaten with a loss of income.	→ Career threats	→ Paternal Supervisor gatekeeping: How supervising fathers hinder other fathers to make use of flexible work arrangements
-Stress need for presence. -Highlight advantage of being around every day. -Emphasize difficulties involved with part-time work and absences.	→ Use of practical reasons	
-Stress business-related needs -Lack of recognition of the wishes of fathers. -Fathers need to pro-actively ask for existing policies.	→ Lack of paternal workplace support that discourages fathers to use existing policies.	