



# **Leading by Example on Parental Leave? How DEI Policies Interact with Male Managers' Fatherhood**

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## **Abstract**

**Title:** Leading by Example on Parental Leave? How DEI Policies Interact with Male Managers' Fatherhood

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The unequal distribution of caregiving responsibilities significantly contributes to lasting career cuts for women. In response, expanding paternal leave is highlighted as a key lever for gender equality. While new legal regulations promote fathers' leave uptake, a DEI-supported paradigm shift in workplace culture is also required, with men in leadership role modeling normative change towards involved fathering.

This study examines how male managers in Germany reconcile their parental leave decisions with professional realities and analyzes how company DEI initiatives can support this process. Based on qualitative research, semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten male managers regarding their parental leave experiences and analyzed using the Gioia method to identify individual, cultural, and organizational decision-making factors.

Findings indicate that leave uptake has been integrated into a new male manager identity, shifting organizational norms towards shared parenting. However, this normalization remains limited to short-term uptakes, reflecting concerns over career security and financial constraints. Supportive corporate DEI measures, including flexible leave policies and workload management, were found to reduce barriers. Contrary to previous research emphasizing stigma and career setbacks, participants reported positive organizational support but identified clear limits to the acceptance of longer leave durations. This divergence suggests that persisting traditional workplace norms are being challenged during this transitional period of cultural change.

Managerial implications include implementing financial incentives, such as bonuses or sabbatical-like salary models, and proactively communicating career guarantees concerning paternal leave. These DEI measures should be integral to a comprehensive, family-friendly corporate culture aimed at promoting gender equality in the workplace.

**Keywords:** Paternal leave, Gender equality, Male managers, Fatherhood, Workplace culture, Family-friendly policies, Parental leave, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, Organizational norm.

## **Resumo**

**Título:** Liderando pelo Exemplo na Licença Parental? Como Políticas de DEI Interagem com a Paternidade de Gestores Masculinos.

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A distribuição desigual das responsabilidades de cuidado contribui para cortes duradouros na carreira das mulheres. A expansão da licença paterna é considerada uma alavanca essencial para a igualdade de gênero. Além de novas regulamentações legais, é necessária uma mudança cultural no local de trabalho, impulsionada por iniciativas de DEI e por homens em posições de liderança que modelam mudanças normativas para uma paternidade mais participativa.

Este estudo analisa como gestores masculinos na Alemanha equilibram decisões sobre licença parental com as realidades profissionais e como iniciativas de DEI podem apoiar esse processo. Com base em entrevistas semiestruturadas com dez gestores masculinos, os dados foram analisados pelo método Gioia, identificando fatores individuais, culturais e organizacionais que influenciam a decisão.

Os resultados mostram que a licença parental está se integrando a uma nova identidade de gestores masculinos, promovendo normas organizacionais voltadas à parentalidade compartilhada. Contudo, essa normalização limita-se a períodos curtos, devido a preocupações com segurança de carreira e restrições financeiras. Medidas de DEI, como políticas flexíveis e gestão da carga de trabalho, ajudam a reduzir barreiras. Apesar de apoios organizacionais positivos, ainda existem limites para a aceitação de períodos prolongados de licença, evidenciando a coexistência de normas tradicionais e mudanças culturais emergentes.

As implicações incluem incentivos financeiros, como bônus e modelos salariais semelhantes a sabáticos, além da garantia de estabilidade na carreira. Essas medidas devem fazer parte de uma cultura corporativa inclusiva e favorável à família, promovendo a igualdade de gênero no trabalho

**Palavras-chave:** Licença paterna, Igualdade de gênero, Gestores masculinos, Paternidade, Cultura organizacional, Políticas favoráveis à família, Licença parental, Diversidade, Equidade e Inclusão, Normas organizacionais

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## List of Abbreviations

DEI	Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion
EIGE	European Institute for Gender Equality
EU	European Union
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development

## 1. Introduction

Promoting gender equality in the workplace is an increasingly critical challenge in today's corporate landscape. Many organizations have adopted Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) frameworks as systematic approaches to reduce the disadvantages faced by women (Ely & Thomas, 2020). Contemporary DEI theories highlight that promoting an inclusive workplace involves not only acknowledging diversity but also reducing structural inequalities to create equal opportunities for all employees and stakeholders (Kaufmann & Derry, 2023).

A majority of DEI gender policies and initiatives focus on and are directed to women. Among other causes of gender inequality, yielding disadvantage for women at work has been found in the so-called "child penalty" (Kleven et al., 2019; Blau & Kahn, 2017) which refers to the significant career disadvantages experienced primarily by women following childbirth. This phenomenon includes reduced labor market participation, diminished earnings and limited career advancement opportunities, all of which have lasting impacts on women's professional trajectories (ibid.).

Accordingly, workplace policies designed to support families have primarily focused on mothers, reflecting traditional gender roles that view women as the primary caregivers (EIGE, 2021). However, with the increasing prevalence of dual-career households, there is growing recognition of the need to rebalance family and work responsibilities through greater father involvement. Paternal leave policies are increasingly recognized as a key measure to promote gender equality by facilitating equal career opportunities for women (Krstic & Hidge, 2019; Pizarro & Gartzia, 2023). Among other studies (Aunkofer et al, 2018; EIGE, 2024; Gartzia et al, 2018; Haas & Hwang, 2019), Pizarro & Gartzia (2023) identify paternal parental leave as an implement of reducing the domestic division of labor, with long-term implications for the professional trajectories of both partners. These policies promote sustained paternal engagement in childcare, thereby supporting gender equality at home and in the workplace.

Although employees are entitled to paid parental leave in almost all OECD countries, fathers show much lower uptake rates than mothers (OECD, 2024). The proportion of fathers taking parental leave is only 10-20% on average across the EU, with significantly shorter leave durations (EIGE, 2024). In addition to financial concerns, many studies explain this significant "implementation gap" (Hipp et al., 2022) in paternal leave with structural and cultural factors

in the workplace that hinder the use of parental leave (ibid.; Ladge & Little, 2019; Perrigino et al., 2018; Haas & Hwang, 2019; Reidl & Holzinger, 2014; Gartzia et al., 2018; Sarabi & Hamori, 2023; Tortuga, 2024).

On the organizational level, masculinity norms and the ideal of the always available and fully devoted employee have a strong impact on fathers' decisions on not-taking parental leave (Haas & Hwang, 2019; Haas et al., 2002; Aunkofer et al., 2018). Although involved fathering is becoming more and more part of male cultural patterns (Ladge & Little, 2019; EIGE, 2024; Prognos, 2022), it contradicts job-centered masculinity norms creating heavy conflicts on fathers' decision-making. In addition to the risk of career cuts, Ladge & Little (2019) note a widespread stigmatization for men who take paternal leave, labeling them as less ambitious, less assertive and not sufficiently career focused. This applies to a greater extent to managers with personal responsibility, fearing financial and image downgrading (Gartzia et al., 2018; Reidl & Holzinger, 2014).

In contrast, flexible leave policies along with structured reintegration programs significantly encourage fathers to take advantage of leave opportunities (Haas & Hwang, 2018; Schiffbänker & Holzinger, 2014; Tortuga, 2024). Such measures not only facilitate the practical integration of work and family tasks but also convey a positive organizational message that engaged fatherhood is respected and valued as a legitimate part of career trajectory. By embedding supportive policies for fathers, companies send a strong signal of their commitment to gender-balanced parental involvement (ibid., Perrigino et al., 2018). Over and beyond, research highlights the need for companies to cultivate a framing corporate culture grounded in supportive values, including caring ethic and family-friendly policies that promote work-life balance and explicitly include fathers' leave (Haas et al., 2002; Haas & Hwang, 2019; Ladge & Little, 2019; Perrigino et al., 2018).

In this context, management plays a crucial role: as "change agents" (Ng & Sears, 2020), managers are expected to advocate for and exemplify inclusive measures such as paternal leave, to drive organizational change. Awareness of the role of fathers should be actively promoted at management level and ideally exemplified as a role model to strengthen this commitment within the organizational culture (Perrigino et al., 2018; Tortuga, 2024).

Nonetheless, male managers face strong challenges in taking paternal leave due to concerns

about career repercussions, negative evaluations, and workload pressures, particularly in high-responsibility roles (Gartzia et al., 2018; Sarabi & Hamori, 2023). Despite formal policies, these barriers discourage them from utilizing available leave, as the fear of damaging their professional image and leadership status prevails (Reidl & Holzinger, 2014; Ladge & Little, 2019). While existing literature explores parental leave policies and their general impact on workplace dynamics and gender equality, research focusing specifically on strategies to promote leave uptake among male leaders remains sparse (Pizarro & Gartzia, 2023).

Overall, only a minority of current literature on DEI policies focuses on men rather than on women (Ladge et al., 2015, Tortuga, 2024), together with a relatively smaller number of publications dealing with DEI policies for managers, rather than for employees (Gartzia, 2019; Gartzia, 2024).

To address such gap in understanding how organizational structures and cultures impact male managers' uptake of paternal leave, this research seeks to enhance our knowledge on DEI strategies tied to paternal leave and its outcomes. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following research question: How can companies design DEI strategies to promote higher uptake rates of parental leave among male leaders? More in detail, this research tries to answer this research question by focusing on organizational overcoming of hurdles such as stigma, structural barriers, and workplace norms (Ladge et al, 2015; Sarabi & Hamori, 2023; Gartzia, 2018).

To address this question, the study examines mid-level male managers in German companies who have taken paternal leave within the last five years. Using an explorative, qualitative approach with the use of the Gioia methodology (Gioia et al., 2013; Adams, 2015; Reinecke & Palazzo, 2016), this research captures the complexity of organizational, cultural, and personal dynamics influencing male managers' decisions. Thus, it discusses how to address such challenges in an effective way to overcome them.

This thesis aims to contribute to current knowledge on DEI practices and parental leave in at least three ways: firstly, by elucidating the organizational and cultural barriers that influence male managers' uptake of paternal leave, enhancing our knowledge on DEI constraints for leadership positions (Gartzia, 2018; Ng & Sears, 2020). Secondly, by identifying effective DEI strategies and structural measures able to increase the likelihood of uptake rates (Haas & Hwang, 2019; Tortuga, 2024). Thirdly, by highlighting how these practices can promote long-term gender equality in caregiving responsibilities (EIGE, 2021; Aunkofer, 2018).

Consequently, three major managerial implications for corporate management can be derived from this study: Firstly, the design of customized company incentive models to promote the acceptance and prolonging of paternal leave for male managers beyond legal compliance. Secondly, the identification of organizational measures to reduce their fears of career penalties associated with paternal leave. Lastly, the study aims to highlight DEI-focused strategies to create an environment where paternal leave becomes a respected and integral part of the leadership role, thereby promoting inclusivity and driving a long-term cultural transformation towards enhanced gender equality.

The thesis is divided into five main sections. Following the introduction, the second section provides a comprehensive literature review, analyzing the current research on paternal leave, DEI strategies, and the organizational, cultural, and structural factors influencing parental leave uptake. The third section introduces the methodological approach, in detail the use of the Gioia methodology, the semi-structured interview design and data analysis. The fourth section presents the findings. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the main results, discusses managerial and theoretical implications, and suggests directions for future research.

## **2. Literature Review: Theoretical Framework and Previous Research**

### **2.1. General Topic – DEI Management and Gender Equality**

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) is a key concept that is becoming increasingly central to the world of work and society. The concept is based on treating all people in the workplace with respect and valuing them equally. Comprehensively implemented DEI policies help to promote equal opportunities, reduce prejudice and develop a sense of community (Ely & Thomas, 2020). Diversity encompasses the positive recognition of a diverse workforce in terms of individual characteristics (such as gender or origin) and also “hidden” features such as personal values, cultural background and life experience (Herring, 2009). Equity refers to the creation of equal conditions for all employees and the recognition of their personal potential in an unprejudiced corporate culture. Inclusion describes the active endeavor to include all people in the company by creating a sense of togetherness, a “belonging”, which should enable an atmosphere of learning from one another (Ely & Thomas, 2020).

This is based on various logics of DEI concepts such as the establishment of justice in a moral sense, an increased profitability of the company, or the establishment of diversity under political pressure to reflect demographic conditions within the company (e.g. appropriate female participation) (Hellerstedt et al., 2024). However, through instrumentalization DEI practices can also become counterproductive if not truly integrated into organizations’ comprehensive core processes (ibid.). In addition to the fundamental embedding of DEI measures in the corporate cultural canon of values, support at all management levels is also a decisive success factor (Ng & Sears, 2020).

To systematically advance gender equality within this framework, structural barriers that maintain gender-specific role expectations must be addressed. A holistic, family-friendly approach that also values the caregiving role of fathers can challenge traditional corporate norms, fostering acceptance of committed fatherhood and equally shared parenting (Humberd et al., 2015; Reidl & Holzinger, 2014). By encouraging paternal leave uptake and recognizing fatherhood as a valued part of the employee experience, organizations can contribute meaningfully to gender equality (ibid.).

In summary, sustainable DEI management should involve the long-term and deliberate implementation of inclusive practices that encourage diverse perspectives, foster innovative problem-solving, and enhance creative and comprehensive decision-making. These measures not only promise internal benefits but also positively impact customer engagement and corporate reputation (Borgerson, 2007; Ely & Thomas, 2020). In this context, promoting a family-friendly culture that values father involvement is crucial for advancing gender equality in the workplace and cultivating an inclusive, dynamic organizational environment.

## **2.2. Parental Paternal Leave within DEI policies**

Paternal leave refers to a job-protected, extended period that fathers can take off work following the birth of their child (EU, 2023). It is designed to support fathers in caregiving while maintaining partial income support. Paternal leave typically spans several months and is regulated by national laws, often allowing flexibility and financial compensation based on prior earnings (Duffy et al., 2020).

All EU member states, and most OECD countries offer gender-neutral paternal leave policies that ensure fathers have structured access to caregiving support and contribute to balancing family responsibilities (OECD, 2024). While maternal parental leave is traditionally socially recognized as necessary for early mother-child bonding and is used to a much greater extent, the uptake rates for paternal leave are low, which is explained, among other things, by the male role reversal, but also by the organizational and ideological barriers for men in the workplace (Haas & Hwang, 2019; Ladge & Little, 2019; Reidl & Holzinger, 2014).

Paternal parental leave is increasingly becoming the focus of interest in creating gender equality in the labor market (Pizarro & Gartzia, 2023). The mandatory introduction of exclusive parental leave arrangements for fathers is intended to contribute to a fairer distribution of child-rearing and household tasks between parents and thus increase mothers' career opportunities. The so-called "child penalty" (Kleven et al., 2019; Blau & Kahn, 2017) puts mothers at a considerable disadvantage on the labor market, while fathers hardly see their earning and career opportunities affected. In Germany, for example, only 30% of mothers return to full-time employment after generally long parental leave and often remain in low-paid part-time jobs despite having high educational qualifications (Görges, 2022). In contrast, 90% of fathers in Germany remain in full-time employment without any significant career break (ibid.)

Parental leave, which is often only taken by mothers, is seen as the starting point of a widening earnings gap with all the associated career disadvantages (Pizarro & Gartzia, 2023). With a share of only 26%, fathers across the EU take parental leave much less frequently, and the periods of absence are significantly shorter (OECD, 2024). The European Union therefore formulated clear regulations for more paternal involvement in its 2019 work-life balance guidelines (EU, 2019). Following the example of the Scandinavian countries, where uptake rates for exclusively offered paternal leave are extremely high in an EU comparison, non-transferable paternal leaves were made mandatory from 2022 on, which are available following the take-it-or-leave-it principle (ibid). Norway and Finland stand for the success of this daddy quota model with a usage rate of almost 90% (Haas & Hwang, 2018). In Spain, the uptake rate of mothers and fathers was almost equalized in 2022 as a result of the 2021 amendment to the law (OECD, 2022).

However, even in the traditionally gender-neutral Scandinavian countries, there is still a considerable implementation gap when it comes to optional parental leave for men (Haas & Hwang, 2018). According to several studies, this is caused by cultural and normative guidelines at the organizational level (Hipp et al., 2022; Ladge & Little, 2019). Hipp et al. (2022) blame the traditional ideal worker norm as well as stable beliefs about gender in the workplace (cf. Williams, 2000). Like Haas & Hwang (2019), they see male employees in companies strongly dependent on peer behavior and managerial support when deciding for or against a leave take-up. Research shows that the organizational culture and their commitment to care values play a significant role for men in decision-making (Haas & Hwang, 2019; Haas et al., 2002). The Italian Tortuga study presents similar results, demonstrating significantly higher uptake rates in father-friendly companies, up to 85% (Tortuga, 2024).

The establishment of paternal parental leave as a key instrument for promoting gender equality must obviously be accompanied by a cultural change in organizations. According to research, embedding statutory leave policies in a father-friendly corporate culture is crucial for successful implementation, from which all players can ultimately benefit (Haas et al., 2002; Haas & Hwang, 2019; Ladge & Little, 2019; Ladge et al., 2015; Perrigino et al., 2018).

### **2.3. Legislation on Parental Leave in the EU and OECD**

The European Union (EU) and Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) have made significant strides in promoting parental leave policies that emphasize both maternal and paternal involvement in early childcare. This legislation aims to support gender equality, encourage work-life balance, and mitigate the negative impacts of caregiving on career progression, particularly for women. Political trends may hinder further advancements.

These parental leave policies typically align with two dominant family models: the traditional male breadwinner model, prevalent across much of Central and Southern Europe, and the dual-career household model, common in the Nordic countries (Haas & Rostgaard, 2011). These models shape caregiving roles significantly, impacting paternal leave uptake rates. The Nordic approach, which supports equal caregiving through flexible, well-compensated leave policies, has contributed to high paternal leave participation. For example, in Norway, almost 90% of fathers take paternal leave, encouraged by policies with non-transferable “father’s quota” of 15 weeks, compensated at full pay (Haas & Hwang, 2019; OECD, 2021). Conversely, in countries with male breadwinner norms, paternal leave uptake remains significantly lower, influenced by limited financial incentives and societal expectations that fathers maintain their role as primary earners (OECD, 2024).

To harmonize work-life balance across the EU, the European Union introduced the 2019 Work-Life Balance Directive (EU, 2021) including a minimum of four months of parental leave per parent with at least two months being non-transferable. This non-transferable provision is specifically designed to increase fathers’ involvement in childcare, thereby challenging the notion that mothers are default primary caregivers. Although the specific length and compensation of paternal leave vary across member states, this directive represents an important step toward standardizing minimum parental leave conditions across Europe (cf. European Parliament, 2019).

EU member states implement these minimums differently, sometimes going beyond the requirements. For example, Sweden offers fathers 90 non-transferable days of parental leave, paid at 80% of their salary, which leads to high uptake rates and a more balanced caregiving model (OECD, 2021). Similarly, Finland recently extended paternal leave to 54 days, with compensation of around 70% of previous earnings with a substantial increase in fathers’ care engagement as a result (OECD, 2021). These high-compensation, non-transferable leave

policies are particularly effective in driving uptake, as they minimize income loss and normalize fathers' participation in caregiving (Haas & Rostgaard, 2011).

Germany, following the example of Scandinavia, has implemented a “partner months” model, introduced in 2007, that encourages fathers' involvement by offering two non-transferable months of parental leave exclusively for the second career, usually fathers. According to the take-it-or-leave-it principle, paid parental leave can be extended to a maximum of 14 months. Parental leave in Germany offers a rate of 67% wage compensation, up to a maximum monthly amount of 1800 Euros (BMFSJ, 2020). This leave model, often referred to as the “daddy quota model”, was designed to incentivize fathers to take at least some parental leave and has been effective in raising participation rates among German fathers to approximately 40% (Federal Statistical Office of Germany, 2024; BMFSJ, 2020).

However, the majority of fathers taking leave only use these partner months, as the financial and cultural barriers to taking extended leave beyond this period remain high (ibid.). Only about 12% of fathers in Germany take leave beyond the two-month “partner quota,” as extending leave often means significant reductions in family income and may affect perceptions of commitment in male-dominated work environments (BMFSJ, 2020; Haas & Hwang, 2019).

In summary, while the EU's Work-Life Balance Directive and OECD guidelines aim to normalize father involvement across member states, significant differences persist. Nordic countries demonstrate that high compensation and non-transferable leave quotas can greatly increase paternal leave uptake. Germany's “daddy quota” model, with its initial success, shows that non-transferable leave provisions are effective in increasing participation but also highlights that further structural and cultural shifts are needed to encourage extended leave for fathers.

## **2.4. Organizational Conditions for Paternal Leave**

Employers play an important role in shaping how paternal leave policies are perceived and utilized within their organizations (Pizarro & Gartzia, 2023; Reidl & Holzinger, 2014; Prognos, 2022; Humberd et al., 2015; Haas & Hwang, 2019). Beyond merely offering leave as a statutory benefit, companies influence uptake through an interplay of policy design, organizational culture, and supportive practices. The successful implementation of paternal leave policies

depends on how well these elements are integrated into the workplace environment, affecting fathers' decisions to take leave (Haas & Hwang, 2018; Ladge & Little, 2019).

According to research, several key dimensions impact the utilization of paternal leave. The design of parental leave policies, including clarity of eligibility and the flexibility of arrangements, directly influences fathers' willingness to take leave (Hipp et al., 2022; Tortuga 2024). Workplace stigmatization can create barriers, where perceptions of career consequences or cultural norms may deter men from participating in extended leave (Reidl & Holzinger, 2014; Perrigino et al., 2018). Managers, in particular, often face role conflicts as they are required, on one hand, to embody their organization's ideal-worker norms, while on the other hand, they seek to integrate their identities as dedicated caregivers (Humberd et al., 2015; Ladge & Little, 2019; Gartzia, 2018).

Organizational support, through clear communication and strong leadership endorsement, helps to reinforce that taking leave is valued and respected within the company (Haas & Hwang, 2019; Ladge et al., 2015). Leaders and Managers can support this cultural shift by taking paternal leave themselves, and, thus, send a positive signal as an exemplary role model (Perrigino et al., 2018; Sarabi & Hamori, 2023; Tortuga 2024).

### **2.4.1. Parental Leave Design**

The design, clarity, and flexibility of parental leave policies are critical to whether fathers feel confident in taking advantage of these entitlements. Haas and Hwang (2019) assert that policies that include options for part-time leave, phased returns, and extended, non-transferable periods encourage uptake by signaling that the organization values work-life balance. Reidl and Holzinger (2014) identify comprehensive leave policies reducing the ambiguity that often surrounds the decision to take leave. Without clear communication and robust policy design, male managers may hesitate to use their leave entitlements due to diffuse fears of career implications. For instance, employees with significant personal responsibilities often choose not to take extended paternal leave when no clear substitute arrangements are available or when they anticipate negative impacts on ongoing projects (Reidl & Holzinger, 2014; Holzinger & Schiffbänker, 2014). Concerns about possible negative performance evaluations and career setbacks inhibit the use of paternal leave, as do fears of overburdening colleagues and work teams (ibid.; Tortuga, 2024).

Organizations offering enhanced parental leave arrangements - such as extended paid leave or the option for intermittent leave periods - create an environment where fathers feel supported in their dual roles as professionals and caregivers (Tortuga, 2024). This approach aligns with findings from Schiffbänker & Holzinger (2014) who observed that companies with well-structured and communicated policies saw greater paternal leave uptake among their employees.

#### **2.4.2. Workplace Stigmatization**

One of the most significant deterrents to fathers taking parental leave is workplace stigmatization. Ladge and Little (2019) discuss how men may perceive or experience subtle (or overt) judgments when they prioritize family commitments over work. This so called “flexibility stigma” (Perrigino et al., 2018) or “femininity stigma” (Rudmann & Mescher, 2013) is often rooted in longstanding, masculine workplace norms that valorize continuous availability and unflagging dedication (Perrigino et al., 2018). Men who take paternal leave are likely to face a “daddy penalty” (Sarabi & Hamori, 2023) that labels them as less committed to work, ambitious and less focused on career advancement. The representative Prognos study on the paternal friendliness of German companies reports that almost 30% of paternal leave users had to put up with negative feedback from management. According to this study, 16% of fathers in leave were even put under pressure to return to work earlier than planned (Prognos, 2022).

For Spanish managers, Gartzia et al. found (2018) massive negative assessments, especially when they took leave beyond the standard length. Therefore, the need to overcompensate after return from paternal leave to signal high levels of commitment seems important especially for managers to reestablish their standing (ibid.; Sarabi & Hamori, 2023). Reidl & Holzinger (2014) identify that such expectations contribute to a reluctance among male managers to request or take extended leave, as doing so can be seen as conflicting with their professional image (ibid.; Ladge & Little 2019).

The concept of the “ideal worker” as described by Williams (2000) encapsulates these norms, portraying the ideal employee as always available and entirely focused on work (cf. Haas & Hwang, 2019; Hipp et al., 2022). This ideal not only marginalizes men who wish to take paternal leave but perpetuates a culture where work-life balance is perceived as secondary to

career ambition. Haas & Hwang (2019) note that changing this requires an intentional effort to redefine workplace success by including balanced family engagement (Haas et al., 2002). Companies that challenge the stigmatization of paternal leave by promoting visible examples of male managers taking leave contribute to breaking down these stereotypes (ibid.; Perrigino et al, 2018; Tortuga, 2024).

### **2.4.3. Organizational Support**

Support from the organization, in both formal and informal forms, is a decisive issue in determining the uptake of paternal leave. Formal support includes well-communicated policies such as mentoring programs for working parents, networking opportunities and reintegration initiatives (Haas & Hwang, 2019; Reidl & Holzinger, 2014). Haas et al. (2002) found that strong endorsement of work-life balance by top management encourages employees to take leave without fear of career detriment. This involves active promotion of leave benefits by supervisors and leadership modeling behaviors that point out the importance of paternal leave (Haas et al., 2002; Pizarro & Gartzia, 2024). Schiffbänker & Holzinger (2014) argue that without visible and consistent support from senior management, employees are less likely to use parental leave, perceiving it as a career risk.

The Italian Tortuga study (2024) identifies employer-initiated prolonging's of paid paternal leave as particularly impactful, with uptake rates approaching 50%. However, the success of such initiatives also depends on complementary father-friendly policies and effective role modeling by managers (Tortuga, 2024).

Informal support refers to the attitudes and actions of colleagues and immediate supervisors. This type of support includes understanding, encouragement, and flexible support shown by peers and managers, which can significantly influence an individual's comfort level in taking leave. Studies have shown that when supervisors exhibit a positive attitude towards paternal leave and actively encourage its use, employees feel more secure in their decisions (Haas & Hwang, 2019; Gartzia et al., 2018). Informal support can be a decisive factor in alleviating stress and concerns related to career impacts, making paternal leave a more attractive option for men (Pizarro & Gartzia, 2023). In contrast, discouraging comments from supervisors, colleagues, and from private peers have an anxiety-inducing effect; the Tortuga study (2024) finds that 25% of fathers face such reactions.

To that, men in leadership often find it difficult to temporarily step away from their job. Workload concerns are prevalent, particularly for those in very high-responsibility leadership roles (Tortuga, 2024). The fear of projects suffering or of colleagues perceiving them as less reliable can dissuade fathers from taking leave, despite available policies (Perrigino et al., 2018). To address these barriers, organizations should not only establish supportive policies but also actively engage in reducing the workload and stress associated with taking leave. This may involve delegating responsibilities, providing interim leadership coverage, and reassuring employees that their roles will be secure upon their return (ibid; Haas & Hwang, 2019).

#### **2.4.4. Cultural Norms**

Cultural norms within the workplace exert a significant influence on the decision-making process related to paternal leave. Acker's (1990) theory of gendered organizational structures suggests that many workplace cultures inherently reinforce traditional gender roles, viewing men as the primary breadwinners and women as primary caregivers. This dichotomy discourages men from participating in caregiving activities and perpetuates the imbalance in parental responsibilities. Reidl & Holzinger (2014) identify that the persistence of these norms within male-dominated industries results in lower paternal leave uptake compared to more gender-balanced sectors.

Haas and Hwang (2019) highlight that workplace cultures that align with a "masculine ethic" - emphasizing competitiveness, dedication, and long hours - create environments that implicitly deter fathers from taking leave. Shifting these cultural norms requires deliberate action from leadership to redefine success and commitment to include caregiving roles. Organizations that promote subcultures valuing work-life integration help create a new norm where paternal leave is viewed as part of responsible and balanced professional behavior.

#### **2.4.5. Personal Motivations and Experiences**

Beyond external policies and cultural factors, personal motivations and experiences are influential in the decision to take paternal leave. Fathers with strong caregiving commitments or those who value an active role in their children's upbringing are more likely to pursue leave options (Haas et al., 2002; Aunkofer, 2018). The literature also points to the importance of

partner dynamics; fathers whose partners hold egalitarian views and encourage shared caregiving are more inclined to take leave. Reidl & Holzinger (2014) indicate that fathers who have previously navigated work-life balance challenges may approach parental leave more positively due to past experiences.

However, personal willingness alone is insufficient without organizational reinforcement. For paternal leave to become normalized, individual motivations must align with a supportive work environment. Companies that recognize and cater to these personal values through active dialogue and family-oriented initiatives contribute to a more holistic approach to paternal leave uptake (Aunkofer et al., 2018; Haas & Hwang, 2019; Perrigino et al., 2018).

### 3. Germany as Empirical Setting

Germany provides an insightful field of study for examining paternal leave uptake and the implementation of family-friendly measures within a DEI framework. The country's status as Europe's largest economy and its early family policy reforms position it uniquely within a landscape marked by evolving cultural norms, political initiatives, and the ongoing challenge of countering stigma for fathers taking parental leave. The German parental leave model, introduced in 2007, was one of the first in Europe to establish "partner months" - non-transferable leave exclusively for fathers (Aunkofer et al., 2018). This early policy reform closely aligns with the EU's 2019 Work-Life Balance Directive, which mandates non-transferable leave for fathers since 2022 to encourage their active participation in caregiving (European Parliament, 2019; BMFSFJ, 2021).

The German parental leave model allows each parent up to 14 months of shared leave, with a 67% wage replacement rate, incentivizing fathers to take at least two "partner months" (Aunkofer et al., 2018; Samtleben et al., 2019). The introduction of partner months has led to a notable increase in the percentage of fathers taking parental leave, reaching approximately 45% in 2024 (Federal Statistical Office of Germany, 2024). While this is a significant improvement, many fathers still limit their leave to the minimal two months, reflecting ongoing cultural and economic barriers that dissuade extended leave (Hipp et al., 2022). For instance, fathers in higher-level positions often perceive extended parental leave as a potential career disadvantage due to prevailing cultural expectations of full-time commitment (Aunkofer et al., 2018).

Germany's model provides a valuable example of how DEI-focused measures can influence work-life balance and gender equality. Although the country has embraced progressive policies, there remains substantial room for improvement in normalizing paternal leave and addressing the stigma associated with caregiving roles for men. Compared to Nordic countries like Sweden and Norway, which offer higher wage replacement rates and longer, mandatory "daddy quotas" with strong paternal uptake, Germany's system appears less robust in promoting long-term father involvement (Duvander & Haas, 2018; OECD, 2021). However, the presence of a legal framework encouraging father-specific leave has made Germany a leading example within the EU, and the implementation of EU-wide directives could drive further improvements in paternal leave uptake across Europe.

Germany's economic strength and proactive policies, combined with the EU's Work-Life Balance Directive, create an ideal environment to study how targeted DEI measures and paternal leave policies impact workplace equality. This examination can yield insights into best practices that encourage both paternal leave participation and broader cultural acceptance of caregiving responsibilities for men, ultimately contributing to a more balanced division of family duties and a reduction in gendered career disadvantages (Samtleben et al., 2019; Aunkofer et al., 2018; EIGE, 2024).

## **4. Research Design**

This chapter presents the research design and methodology employed to examine the factors influencing paternal leave uptake among fathers in managerial positions. Adopting a qualitative, inductive approach (Gioia et al., 2013), this study relies on semi-structured interviews and secondary data to answer the research question: What sustainable measures and DEI strategies can companies adopt to promote higher uptake rates of parental leave among male leaders, while overcoming hurdles such as stigma, structural barriers, and workplace norms?

### **4.1. Research Approach**

The choice of a qualitative method is justified by the study's focus on capturing in-depth insights into complex social and ethical dynamics, such as workplace stigmatization, DEI policies, and managerial attitudes toward paternal leave (Reinecke & Palazzo, 2016; Bansal & Corley, 2011). This exploratory approach allows for a deeper understanding of the subjective experiences and perspectives of participants, which is essential for examining the corporate and social-cultural barriers to paternal leave uptake.

The inductive approach is further supported by this triangulated methodology, as it enables the study to build theories and uncover patterns based on data gathered and analyzed throughout the research process. By grounding interview findings in secondary data, this study facilitates the emergence of new insights related to DEI, parental paternal leave, and organizational support systems. This approach enhances the depth and contextual relevance of the conclusions within the specific context of German companies (Gioia et al., 2013).

Since this study explores the under-researched topic of paternal leave uptake among male managers, the deductive approach (Bell et al., 2022) was seen as less suitable for generating new theoretical insights.

### **4.2. Data Gathering**

The study explores the perspectives and experiences of fathers in managerial roles from various sectors regarding paternal leave. The sample consists of ten managers in mid-level

management, all of whom have at least a bachelor's degree and represent various industries. Focusing exclusively on managers with at least a bachelor's degree ensures that education is not a variable influencing paternal leave uptake.

The choice of fathers in managerial positions is deliberate. Managers are often highly influential in shaping workplace norms and policies (Ackers, 1990; Haas et al., 2002; Pizarro & Gartzia, 2023), and their perspectives can provide valuable insights into both personal and organizational factors influencing the uptake of parental leave. Fathers in managerial roles may face unique challenges and pressures, as they often balance high expectations for professional dedication with their family responsibilities. This dual responsibility makes them an ideal group for exploring the cultural and structural barriers that exist within corporate environments concerning paternal leave uptake. Additionally, participants were selected based on taking parental leave within the same timeframe over the past five years. This ensures that they experienced similar overall economic conditions and workplace norms, making their experiences more comparable.

This purposive sampling approach allows for an in-depth qualitative examination of how DEI policies and managerial perspectives impact the uptake of paternal leave in corporate settings. With a sample size of ten, comprising participants with diverse professional backgrounds, the study is designed to capture complex social and organizational dynamics. This diversity allows for a differentiated understanding of the role of factors in the uptake of parental leave among male managers.

This study relies on semi-structured interviews as the primary method for data collection, specifically targeting fathers in managerial roles. Semi-structured interviews were chosen for their flexibility, allowing participants to freely share their insights while maintaining consistency across responses (Rowley, 2012). This approach is well-suited to the study's objectives, as it enables a deep exploration of personal and organizational factors affecting paternal leave uptake and DEI policy implementation. The semi-structured format provides a balance between guided questions and open dialogue, essential for capturing nuanced perspectives on sensitive topics such as workplace stigmatization and parental leave (Adams, 2015).

Interviews were conducted remotely via Zoom and Microsoft Teams. These platforms were selected for their accessibility and familiarity, facilitating participant comfort and engagement, which is crucial in discussions that touch on potentially sensitive personal and workplace dynamics. Each interview was recorded with participant consent to ensure accuracy in capturing responses. The average duration of each interview was between 25 and 45 minutes, so that the participants had enough time to discuss their experiences in detail without feeling rushed. This length provided a comprehensive view of each participant's perspective on DEI policies, corporate support structures, and the broader societal implications of parental leave uptake.

To streamline the process, AI-assisted transcription was initially employed to transcribe recordings, producing an efficient preliminary text version. Following this, a manual review was conducted to ensure precision, capturing any nuanced language and expressions that might be relevant to the analysis. Since the interviews were conducted in German, each transcription was then carefully translated and summarized in English, with emphasis on retaining the full meaning and context of participants' insights.

### **4.3. Methodology**

This study utilized the Gioia methodology for qualitative content analysis, which is widely recognized for its inductive approach in exploring participants' experiences and translating them into theoretical constructs (Gioia et al., 2013). The methodology emphasizes capturing the voices of the interviewees authentically, allowing for the discovery of new conceptual insights directly grounded in the data (Gioia et al., 2013). It avoids the imposition of pre-existing theories, fostering an open analysis of the phenomena as described by participants (Gioia et al., 2013).

The data analysis process began with the identification of first-order concepts, where the participants' original language was preserved to reflect their perspectives accurately. These were later synthesized into second-order themes, which abstracted the raw data into a more conceptual and theoretical framework. The second-order themes were integrated into aggregate dimensions that provide a cohesive representation of the underlying dynamics and relationships within the data (Gioia et al., 2013). Finally, the second-order themes were combined into aggregate dimensions that represent the main dynamics found in the data. These dimensions show how organizational support, cultural norms, personal motivations, and perceived barriers

influence male managers' decisions about paternal leave. The analysis links participants' experiences to broader concepts, highlighting how workplace policies, culture, and personal priorities shape their choices.

Theoretical insights emerged through iterative comparisons between data-derived dimensions and existing literature in second order themes. This process highlighted both precedent frameworks and potential new contributions to the field, ensuring that the findings resonate with broader academic discussions while maintaining the originality of insights derived from participant experiences (Gioia et al., 2013).

To ensure the reliability and validity of the findings, this study employed multiple qualitative research strategies. A standardized interview protocol ensured consistency across participant interactions, while audio-recorded and manually reviewed transcriptions maintained accuracy (Adams, 2015; Reinecke et al., 2016). The study also applied member checking, where participants reviewed summarized responses to confirm accurate interpretations, ensuring authenticity and reducing researcher bias (Reinecke et al., 2016). Furthermore, a comprehensive audit trail documented all research stages, including data collection, coding, and analysis, enhancing transparency and confirmability (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). To ensure ethical standards, all participant data was anonymized, and securely stored, with identities fully protected. These measures collectively strengthened the trustworthiness of the research, ensuring findings are credible, dependable, and aligned with qualitative research rigor. This approach also supports broader contributions to DEI and organizational behavior frameworks by providing reliable, grounded insights.

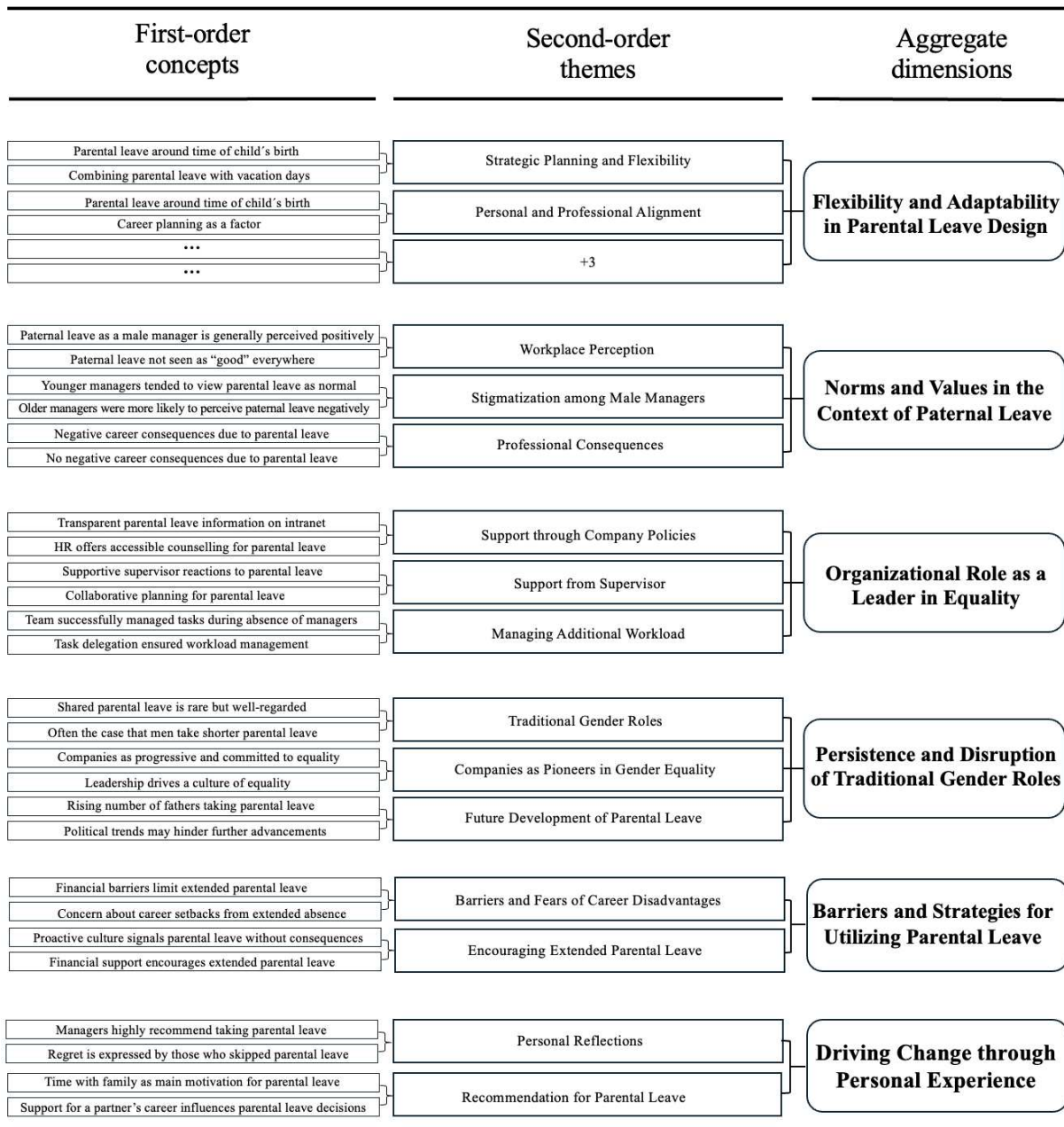
## 5. Findings

Following the approach of Gioia et al. (2013), a qualitative content analysis was conducted to identify key themes and dimensions from ten semi-structured interviews with male managers. The analysis systematically structured the data into first-order concepts, second-order themes, and six aggregate dimensions, which are visualized in Figure 1. The findings are supported by direct quotes to ensure they reflect the perspectives of the interviewees and are methodically structured in Appendix 3.

In total, 162 first-order concepts were identified, which were grouped into 18 second-order themes and ultimately consolidated into six aggregate dimensions:

1. Flexibility and Adaptability in Parental Leave Design
2. Norms and Values in the Context of Parental Leave
3. Organizational Role as a Leader in Equality
4. Persistence and Disruption of Traditional Gender Roles
5. Barriers and Strategies for Utilizing Paternal Leave
6. Driving Change Through Personal Experience

These dimensions address the central research question: What sustainable measures and DEI strategies can companies adopt to promote higher uptake rates of parental leave among male leaders, while overcoming hurdles such as stigma, structural barriers, and workplace norms? Each dimension and its related themes provide essential insights into the structural, cultural, and personal factors influencing the uptake of parental leave, offering actionable implications for promoting a more inclusive workplace culture.



**Figure 1: Overview of Data Analysis Following Gioia Methodology**

Source: Own illustration based on Gioia et al. (2013)

## 5.1. Flexibility and Adaptability in Parental Leave Design

*Strategic Planning and Flexibility.* The interviews reveal that male managers approach their parental leave strategically. Eight out of ten respondents chose to take parental leave, or part of it, around the time of their child's birth. One manager explained: "I took one month of parental leave after the birth, and seven more months will follow" (MA10).

Three respondents combined their parental leave with vacation days to create longer periods of absence. “I was away from work for twelve weeks because I managed to combine it with vacation days and flexible working hours before and after” described another manager (MA9).

*Personal and Professional Alignment.* The vast majority of managers stated that professional projects or obligations did not influence the timing of their parental leave. Their decision was driven primarily by personal interests. One manager emphasized: “This was a personal decision. There were no specific professional projects or obligations that influenced this choice” (MA7). However, one respondent highlighted career planning as a factor: “Two months worked better for me due to my career planning and the circumstances at the time” (MA3).

*Financial Aspects in Decision-Making.* For two-thirds of respondents, financial considerations played a role in deciding whether and how long to take parental leave. Many managers based the length of their leave on the parental allowance available: “Yes, definitely. The parental allowance enabled us to finance this period. Although it wasn’t as high as my regular salary, it provided basic security” (MA4).

Conversely, one-third of respondents stressed that financial aspects were not a factor. As one manager put it: “No, this decision wasn’t about money. For me, it wasn’t about finances” (MA3).

*Re-Entry after Parental Leave.* All interviewed managers expressed satisfaction with the flexibility their companies offered when returning to work after parental leave. Managers who took only two months of leave often opted to return directly from 100% absence to full-time work. One respondent noted: “My employer is very flexible. There are many options, but I went from being completely off to fully back on the job” (MA10).

In contrast, those who took more than two months of leave made greater use of their companies’ flexible re-entry options. One manager shared: “Initially, I worked 28 hours, then I was completely away for three months, and afterward, I resumed work at 28 hours a week” (MA6).

*Government Regulations and Support.* Although not explicitly asked during the interviews, four managers emphasized the benefits of Germany’s parental leave regulations. One manager noted: “Many envy us for having such good policies in Germany. You retain your job and still receive money during parental leave. That’s really good here” (MA3). Another manager added that the state plays a crucial role: “I’m glad it’s regulated by the state. If companies had the choice to make it voluntary, it would be less accepted” (MA1).

## **5.2. Norms and Values in the Context of Parental Leave**

*Workplace Perception.* The findings indicate that taking parental leave as a male manager is generally perceived positively. Seven out of nine respondents shared similar sentiments, such as: “The perception is overwhelmingly positive. It’s acknowledged that fathers want to take responsibility” (MA5).

However, two managers reported encountering negative reactions from colleagues: “It’s not seen as ‘good’ everywhere.” (MA2).

*Stigmatization among Male Managers.* When asked about general attitudes among male manager colleagues, a more nuanced picture emerged. Younger managers tended to view parental leave as normal, whereas older managers were more likely to perceive it negatively. One manager explained: “I think senior-level and C-level executives, particularly among older generations, tend to view it critically” (MA4). Another added: “Among younger executives, it’s not an issue, but I believe older ones still see it differently” (MA6).

*Professional Consequences.* Only one out of ten managers reported negative career consequences due to parental leave. He was denied a promised position for questionable reasons and was told: “We have always said children are a problem” (MA1).

The majority of respondents, however, emphasized that they experienced no adverse effects on their careers. As one manager put it: “No, not at all. I didn’t notice any difference in terms of my career, either before or after parental leave” (MA3).

## **5.3. Organizational Role as a Leader in Equality**

*Support through Structured Company Policies.* The interviews highlighted that companies generally provide comprehensive and accessible information and consultation services for parental leave. One respondent stated: “It was relatively transparent on the intranet. There’s a lot of information you can access independently, and HR was helpful for individual questions” (MA9).

There was only one negative voice. A manager specifically criticized that his company did not have detailed parental leave standards available on the intranet: “I didn’t find it very transparent. I had to reach out to HR several times, and after multiple inquiries, I received an FAQ that is currently under development” (MA10).

*Support from Supervisors.* Nine out of ten surveyed managers reported positive and supportive reactions from their supervisors. The respondents consistently described that this support made taking parental leave noticeably easier for them. One manager illustrated the situation as follows: “My supervisor reacted very positively. We discussed together how to organize my absence, who would take over which tasks, and which topics we might pause. This support helped me take my parental leave without any problems” (MA7). Only one manager reported a clearly negative reaction: “We have a managing director who doesn’t find it funny at all” (MA1). This individual case demonstrates that, despite widespread support from supervisors, contrasting attitudes still exist that hinder access to parental leave.

*Managing Additional Workload.* The majority of companies appear well-equipped to compensate for the workload caused by parental leave. Of the ten managers surveyed, nine reported that the additional work resulting from their parental leave was well organized and fully managed. One manager described this process as follows: “My tasks were managed by my deputy and the team.” (MA5).

Only one manager reported that he was unable to delegate certain leadership tasks and therefore had to complete them himself in the evenings or on weekends: “My team leaders took on many tasks, especially in meetings. I completed some work myself in the evenings or on weekends because I couldn’t fully delegate certain leadership responsibilities” (MA4).

#### **5.4. Persistence and Disruption of Traditional Gender Roles**

*Traditional Gender Roles.* The interviewed managers unanimously observed that traditional gender roles remain largely unchanged: men are seen as providers, and women as caregivers. One manager explained: “In reality, it’s still often the case that men take shorter parental leave while women take longer” (MA8).

Only two respondents noted that shared parental leave is positively received when taken. As one manager put it: “Longer periods are less common, but when someone takes this route, it’s viewed positively” (MA7).

*Companies as Pioneers in Gender Equality.* All respondents described their companies as progressive and committed to equality. Both parents are encouraged to take parental leave. However, only two managers mentioned specific incentives, such as additional financial support: “There are even programs like extra parental allowance supported by the company” (MA7).

Another manager highlighted the role of organizational culture: “This is also because my

employer promotes such topics from the top leadership level, ensuring this progressive attitude is visible throughout the organization” (MA10).

*Future Development of Parental Leave.* Most managers believe that the proportion of fathers taking parental leave will continue to rise in the future, along with the duration of paternal leave. As one manager observed: “I think this is changing. I notice more and more fathers taking parental leave, even for two months or longer. It’s becoming more accepted, although it’s a slow process” (MA10).

However, two managers expressed concerns about political and societal trends potentially hindering progress. One explained: "I am not yet sure in which direction things will develop after the last European elections." (MA6).

## **5.5. Barriers and Strategies for Utilizing Paternal Leave**

*Barriers and Fears of Career Disadvantages.* Regarding the general situation, both within and outside their companies, the interviewees see a need for action to encourage male managers to take extended parental leave (i.e., longer than two months). Seven out of ten respondents cited financial disadvantages as a barrier, stating that “parental allowance often does not suffice to cover living expenses, especially in large cities” (MA4). However, even more significant is the concern about missing out on important career opportunities due to an extended absence, a factor highlighted as a decisive reason by nine out of ten managers. One manager encapsulated this sentiment by explaining that “the fear of being absent from a crucial project is associated with long-term consequences” (MA2).

*Encouraging Extended Parental Leave.* Promoting a proactive company culture, ensuring clear career security, and providing financial support are identified by the respondents as essential measures to motivate male managers to take longer parental leaves. Proactive culture signals that parental leave is a given and has no negative consequences. “Leaders should act as role models and demonstrate that parental leave is possible even in higher positions”, as expressed by the majority of managers (MA7). These two points appear to be interconnected in the eyes of the respondents. They view supervisors as role models and training sessions as suitable methods for implementing these measures. Financial support during parental leave was also mentioned as an important factor. One manager emphasized that such support plays a crucial role in encouraging fathers to take extended time off.

## 5.6. Driving Change Through Personal Experience

*Personal Reflections.* When asked about their motivation for taking parental leave, eight out of ten respondents cited spending quality time with family and children as the primary reason for choosing to take time off. One manager explained: “Time with the family was the main reason. It is a wonderful way for the family to grow together without the stress of work and private life” (MA7).

Only one manager emphasized that his decision was driven not only by the desire to spend time with his child but also to support his wife so that she could return to her career earlier. He stated: “It was important to me to spend time with my child and also to ease my wife’s return to professional life” (MA9).

One individual opinion, which showed a fundamental desire to distance himself from the company, was: “I just wanted to take a break” (MA1). These statements illustrate that while the reasons for taking parental leave are individual, they are often shaped by family and personal priorities.

The data indicate that the desire to spend time with family is the central motive for male managers to take parental leave.

*Recommendation for Parental Leave.* The managers who have taken parental leave consistently speak positively about their experiences and recommend that other leaders also take advantage of this opportunity. They particularly emphasized the high value of time with family and children. One manager aptly summarized: “I can only recommend everyone to take parental leave. The time with the children is priceless, and you will regret it later if you miss this opportunity” (MA4).

Additionally, managers who have either not taken or only partially taken parental leave expressed regret over their decision. One manager openly stated how much he later regretted not having had this experience: “I deeply regret not having done it” (MA8).

The experiences and reflections of the surveyed managers highlight the high emotional and personal significance of parental leave.

## **6. Discussion**

The findings of this study provide deeper insights into how managers in German companies approach parental leave. Since this research focuses exclusively on the managerial level, a domain that has been underexplored, it is particularly significant to examine which existing theoretical insights are confirmed and where this work contributes to extending the literature. Overall, six thematic and actionable fields were identified as crucial for addressing this topic. Moreover, this study offers companies practical recommendations on how to use these thematic areas to promote greater gender equality in parental leave for managers, a consideration that is increasingly relevant in managerial decisions about employers today. However, it is also important to acknowledge the limitations of this work.

### **6.1. Theoretical and Managerial Contribution**

#### **Flexibility and Adaptability in Parental Leave Design**

Managers consciously scheduled their leave immediately after the birth of their child, sometimes combining it with vacation days to allow for a longer and more flexible break. These findings, coded as “Strategic Planning and Flexibility”, reinforce the relevance of flexible and clearly defined leave policies for managers, a topic emphasized in the literature as critical for leave uptake (Haas & Hwang, 2019; Reidl & Holzinger, 2014).

Interestingly, professional commitments or ongoing projects were rarely perceived as obstacles, with personal priorities taking precedence in their decision-making. Summarized in the code “Personal and Professional Alignment”, the study shows a clear priority of private life, which comes close to the need for identity change identified by Ladge & Little (2019). The new male manager role, as this study suggests, now includes father duties with corresponding periods of professional absence.

Most of the managers surveyed cited the provision of parental leave as a pro-argument for uptake. Under the identified theme of "Financial Aspects in Decision-Making", these findings align with former research by Haas & Rostgaard (2011) and Schiffbänker & Holzinger (2014). However, the current allowance limited to €1800 per month was deemed insufficient for managerial incomes, consistent with research identifying financial constraints as a barrier to extended leave (BMFSJ, 2020).

Particularly noteworthy is the availability of flexible return-to-work models, including part-time options, coded as "Re-Entry After Parental Leave." Most Managers returned directly to full-time roles, while those with longer absences benefited from part-time or phased re-entry options. These strategies confirm research findings concerning the profits of gradual reintegration facilitating the uptake of longer leave periods (Haas & Hwang, 2019).

Government policies were highlighted as key enablers, respondents praised Germany's legal framework for ensuring job security and financial support, which normalizes parental leave uptake and reflects its foundational role (BMFSJ, 2020), coded in total as "Government Regulations and Support." In contrast, this study clearly shows that although longer leave periods are possible in the German parental leave model, they are rarely accepted.

Taken together, these issues form the overarching dimension of "Flexibility and Adaptability in Parental Leave Design", which is limited by financial constraints despite all the positive evaluations. While German parental leave arrangements are often seen as flexible and progressive in terms of participation (Duvander & Haas, 2018; OECD, 2021), the shorter uptake of parental leave by managers remains the prevailing norm due to inadequate wage replacement rates.

### **Norms and Values in the Context of Parental Leave**

The results portray an overwhelmingly positive internal response to male managers taking parental leave, coded as "Workplace Perception." Unlike previous literature (Prognos, 2022; Tortuga, 2024), which reports 25-30% negative feedback from senior leadership, participants in this study almost exclusively described positive experiences. However, a generational divide is evident, reflected in the code "Stigmatization Among Male Managers for Taking Parental Leave." From the described reaction patterns of the managers surveyed, it became clear that younger managers view paternal leave as normal and self-evident, while older managers expressed reservations. These findings highlight lingering traditional attitudes that prioritize high managerial presence and availability (Humberd et al., 2015; Sarabi & Hamori 2023).

Interestingly, the study does not confirm findings in the literature regarding stigmatization (Perrigino et al., 2018; Rudmann & Mescher, 2013) or the perception that fathers are less ambitious or career-oriented (Sarabi & Hamori, 2023). These results, coded as "Professional Consequences", indicate that managerial careers are rarely negatively impacted by parental

leave. Nevertheless, this study does yield more critical findings concerning the general perception of fathers taking parental leave, beyond the personal experiences of the participants. Interviewees perceive mothers with long leave periods within the company as the “normal case”, while observing fathers usually limiting themselves to the two “daddy months”.

Persistent stereotypes of men as providers and women as caregivers seem to remain as barriers to broader uptake, reinforcing prior research on traditional workplace dynamics (Reidl & Holzinger, 2014).

These findings contribute to the aggregate dimension "Norms and Values in the Context of Parental Leave" by confirming the growing acceptance of paternal leave while exposing generational and cultural barriers. This study enhances existing literature by illustrating how shifting perceptions and persistent stereotypes interact, offering insights for future interventions aimed at fostering more inclusive workplace practices.

### **Organizational Role as a Leader in Equality**

Existing research (Haas & Hwang, 2019; Gartzia et al., 2018; Ladge & Little, 2019) highlights the importance of formal company support for parental leave uptake. This study confirms that managers perceive such support positively, with accessible information and consultation services as key elements, summarized and coded as "Support through Company Policies." According to this study, most companies provide comprehensive guidance through intranet platforms and HR consultations aligning with the literature’s recommendation for transparent and well-structured leave policies to facilitate uptake (Haas & Hwang, 2019; Perrigino et al., 2018).

Almost all managers surveyed experienced support from their management, their supervisors showed a positive and supportive attitude towards parental leave and actively facilitated leave planning and task delegation. This study finds that the code "Support from Supervisors" is a decisive factor empowering employees to make confident decisions. Existing research also highlights the importance of supervisory support in normalizing parental leave (Haas & Hwang, 2019; Ng & Sears, 2018; Sarabi & Hamori 2023) and, thus, facilitate the uptake for managers. Fears of professional repercussions are mitigated, fostering a culture where parental leave is both accepted and valued (Tortuga, 2024).

The interrogated managers also find their companies well-prepared in effective workload management to address the operational challenges posed by managerial absences during parental leave. Delegations to teams and substitute regulations helped to reduce concerns about overburdening colleagues. These findings coded as "Managing Additional Workload" highlight structured interim solutions as essential for promoting leave uptake confirming the results of the Tortuga Study (2024). Thus, companies are not only implementing clear regulations but are also actively contributing to employee relief and security, as recommended in the literature (Perrigino et al., 2018).

As the aggregate dimension "Organizational Role as a Leader in Equality" has been identified, the findings suggest that companies are promoting a transparent and encouraging approach to parental leave on an organizational level with an increasing appreciation of involved fathering. But, according to former research, only a sustainable transformation towards a gender-equitable, inclusive corporate culture can ensure the lasting compatibility of work and family for both parents in the long term (Ng & Sears; 2020, Haas & Hwang; 2019, Hipp et al.; 2022).

### **Persistence and Disruption of Traditional Gender Roles**

Interviewed managers described, contrary to their own experiences, the persistence of traditional gender roles within their companies. The expectation for men to remain the primary breadwinner while women take on caregiving roles remains prominent, according to this research. Under the code "Traditional Gender Roles", this study highlights the expectation that cultural norms at the workplace will remain as a significant barrier for an equally shared uptake of paternal leave of men and women. This dynamic, particularly visible in male-dominated industries, hinders gender equality and the acceptance of extended parental leave for fathers (Haas & Wang, 2019; Reidl & Holzinger, 2014; Acker, 1990; Hipp et al., 2022).

Nevertheless, organizations are described as progressive, actively encouraging both parents to take parental leave. Therefore, the code "Companies as Pioneers in Gender Equality" was identified as aligning with research that classifies organizational support as a key driver of gender equality and inclusive culture promotion (Gartzia et al., 2018; Perrigino et al., 2018).

The findings also indicate a growing acceptance of longer paternal leave uptake, reflected in the theme "Future Development of Parental Leave." The concerns expressed by the managers about upcoming societal and political resistance highlight the need for continued advocacy and

stable policy frameworks fostering an inclusive workplace culture (Reidl & Holzinger, 2014; Ng & Sears, 2020).

Under the allocated aggregate dimension "Persistence and Disruption of Traditional Gender Roles", this study highlights the tension between entrenched societal norms and proactive organizational practices, offering insights into the gradual evolution of gender roles in the workplace. A key insight from this study is the clear divergence between managers' personal experiences and their general perceptions, which contributes to new research findings. This could signal a cultural change in various directions challenging existing workplace norms.

### **Barriers and Strategies for Utilizing Parental Uptake**

The findings indicate that the surveyed executives consistently recommend taking parental leave. A limitation of career opportunities, coded as "Barriers and Fears of Career Disadvantages", is feared by almost all respondents only in cases of care-related leave exceeding two months. This expands existing research findings, which suggest that the uptake of paternal leave by executives is generally associated with fears (Reidl & Holzinger, 2014; Hipp et al., 2022; Perrigino et al., 2018). The present study establishes two-month paternal leave as the norm, even at the executive level.

Financial disadvantages are cited as an additional obstacle to extended leave uptake and are accordingly coded as "Barriers." These findings align with existing research emphasizing the need for financial support (Tortuga, 2024) and explicit career protection measures to motivate male executives to take longer parental leave (Haas & Hwang, 2019; Ladge et al., 2015).

Career security and the integration of male parental leave into corporate culture are identified in the present study as factors that could reduce executives' anxieties, as reflected in the code "Encouraging Extended Parental Leave." Within the aggregated dimension "Barriers and Strategies for Utilizing Paternal Leave", the study also reinforces the literature's recommendation that executives should lead by example and demonstrate that extended paternal leave is feasible even in higher leadership positions (Sarabi & Hamori, 2023; Perrigino et al., 2018). Moreover, this study adds to the literature by suggesting that targeted DEI initiatives such as trainings at the management level could further normalize extended paternal leave and promote cultural change.

### **Driving Change Through Personal Experience**

The motivation for taking parental leave, as reported by participants, is deeply rooted in personal values. Spending time with family and children emerged as the primary reason, consistent with previous research (Haas et al., 2002; Aunkofer, 2018). Additional motivations, such as supporting a partner's career, highlight the multifaceted nature of these decisions and their broader implications for family dynamics, therefore labelled as "Personal Reflections."

All participants strongly recommend paternal leave, emphasizing its transformative impact on personal and family well-being. The experiences of the managers surveyed underline the high emotional and personal value of parental leave and contribute to the topic "Recommendation for Parental leave." Managers who took little or no leave expressed regret, further reinforcing the importance of this experience for fostering family connections.

Under the aggregated dimension of "Driving Change through Personal Experience", the managers surveyed can be seen as role models. Based on their own parental leave experiences, it is their broader task to act as "change agents" (Ng & Sears, 2020) towards an inclusive and gender-fair company culture and, thus, advancing the sustainable acceptance of paternal leave (Perrigino et al., 2018; Sarabi & Hamori, 2023; Tortuga, 2024).

### **Managerial Contributions**

This study highlights that state financial compensation for income loss during parental leave is insufficient for managers. Companies could address this by offering financial incentives such as bonuses or premiums for extended parental leave. Interest-free loans from employers could also help offset financial losses. Another option could be a work-time model analogous to a "sabbatical", where a portion of the salary is saved beforehand and disbursed during parental leave in addition to state benefits. Furthermore, companies could engage in lobbying efforts to advocate for higher financial compensation during parental leave.

The study also points out that the organizational and legal frameworks fall short. Specifically, the statutory regulation that extends parental benefits by two months if both partners take leave creates an implicit norm where fathers typically only take two months. Companies could counter this trend by implementing their own policies to support managers taking longer parental leave. The most critical aspect is a "career guarantee" that prevents a "fatherhood penalty", such as career stagnation or demotion, thereby mitigating long-term financial losses.

To establish a company culture that promotes parental leave for managers, firms should go beyond passive information dissemination (e.g., intranet resources) and implement active measures such as regular seminars and events that positively communicate the topic. Such initiatives could be particularly impactful for older managers, who, as this study shows, often hold more negative attitudes toward parental leave for managers.

Strengthening the informal cultural aspects of organizations is another recommended measure. Companies can actively leverage the positive experiences of their own managers, positioning them as internal role models and testimonials. These managers could share their experiences at company events and seminars, mentor expectant fathers, or support internal networks for advice and exchange.

## **6.2. Limitations and Further Research**

This study provides insights into how male managers navigate paternal leave in German corporations but has several limitations, along with opportunities for future research.

First, the sample focuses on male mid-level managers in Germany, excluding perspectives from top executives or entry-level employees. Senior leaders may face greater career risks, while junior employees might experience different pressures. Future research could compare these groups to explore how paternal leave varies by career stage.

Second, the findings reflect Germany's legislative and cultural context, including its parental leave framework, which reserves two non-transferable months for fathers. While this offers valuable insights, the results may not apply to countries with different laws or norms. Future studies could adopt a cross-national approach, comparing Germany to nations with progressive policies, like Scandinavia, or limited provisions to assess how laws and culture shape caregiving roles.

Third, the study lacks a longitudinal perspective, making it unclear if reported shifts, like greater acceptance of paternal leave, reflect lasting changes or temporary responses to regulations. Longitudinal studies could track how male managers' careers evolve after taking leave and assess long-term impacts on leadership opportunities.

Lastly, future studies could include these stakeholders to capture diverse perspectives.

Future research should also explore legislative and cultural factors influencing paternal leave uptake internationally. Longitudinal studies could analyze career trajectories, while research on the interplay between paternal and maternal leave could reveal workplace gender dynamics. Examining financial incentives and tailored workplace policies may offer insights into promoting equitable parental leave.

## 7. Conclusion

Gender equality in the workplace remains a significant challenge tied to a variety of socio-economic causes, among which the unequal distribution of caregiving responsibilities being a primary cause of women's sustained career disadvantages. In this context, the expansion of paternal parental leave is increasingly viewed as a critical lever for addressing these inequalities and is being actively promoted through newly regulated parental leave models. At the organizational level, this paradigm shift requires a cultural transformation - one that aligns male workplace norms and corporate practices with the realities of modern fatherhood, including extended job absences. This study confirms prior research, showing that such a shift necessitates a fundamental adaptation of workplace structures and cultural norms. Male leaders are central to this transformation, serving both as key agents of normative change and as a demographic facing the greatest hurdles in taking parental leave.

This study explores how male managers in Germany reconcile their decisions to take parental leave with professional realities and identifies how DEI-initiatives can support these efforts. Using qualitative research, ten semi-structured interviews with middle managers were analyzed following the Gioia methodology to examine barriers, strategies, and workplace cultural dynamics.

A newly observed dynamic revealed that prioritizing family over professional obligations is no longer perceived as a role conflict, either personally or organizationally. This study supplements prior findings on the "fully devoted employee" ideal of male leadership with evidence of mutual acceptance of family-related absences. Among all participants, paternal leave was consistently regarded as a "normal practice" for fathers in leadership positions. This normalization contributes to a more inclusive organizational culture and fosters increased paternal awareness.

Supportive DEI measures identified in this study include flexible leave and reintegration models, transparent communication of parental leave policies, and effective workload management during absences. In line with previous findings, these organizational strategies were perceived as encouraging and were interpreted as endorsements of paternal leave. In contrast to prior research, which often highlights negative career impacts or stigma for male leaders, most respondents in this study felt positively supported by both leadership and peers, with virtually no career setbacks reported.

However, nearly all participants limited their parental leave to the two “daddy months” stipulated by German parental leave legislation, thereby adhering to a socially and legally established standard. For leaders, it becomes clear that while this new identified male manager role accepts and promotes fatherhood duties, longer caregiving absences remain outside its scope. As a result, all managers expressed clear career concerns about extending their parental leave and noted a lack of encouraging signals from employers in this regard.

Thus, this study contributes to academic discourse by illuminating the dynamic interaction between changing attitudes toward the normalization of paternal leave and persistent workplace norms that hinder equitable usage. Future research could explore this tension further, as it appears only partially attributable to generational differences.

Consistent with prior findings, this study demonstrates that legislative measures, such as Germany's limited allocation of partner months, are insufficient to dismantle entrenched masculine workplace cultures. This is particularly true where wage replacement rates, as in Germany, fall significantly below typical managerial salaries, creating a financial disincentive for extended leave. Unlike earlier research, which identified economic disadvantages as a primary deterrent to paternal leave, this study finds that inadequate financial support primarily shortens leave duration rather than dissuading uptake entirely. Nonetheless, these financial constraints delay the development of a gender-equitable, inclusive workplace culture. Despite their own positive experiences with parental leave, participants predominantly viewed the German corporate landscape as still adhering to traditional gender roles despite their own positive experiences with parental leave. They do not anticipate a widespread equalization of paternal leave in the near future. This divergence suggests that existing workplace norms are being questioned during this transitional period of cultural change in organizations.

This study underlines the opportunity for companies to leverage this moment to modernize workplace gender roles and advance inclusive workplace cultures. Based on these findings, future DEI strategies should focus on addressing the identified key barriers to extended paternal leave. Career security for leadership personnel must extend beyond short leave periods and be explicitly guaranteed for longer absences. Proactive communication on this front would complement the broadly family-friendly DEI approaches recommended in prior research. Additionally, companies should explore financial incentives, such as bonus programs or sabbatical-like models, to overcome the economic hurdles faced by managerial personnel. A

combination of informal DEI policies, well-structured leave models, and an overall father-friendly workplace culture can drive longer paternal leave among male leaders.

In sum, this study provides valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities surrounding parental leave uptake among male managers, helping to close the research gap in this area. Male managers' actions significantly contribute to cultural change, positioning them as key figures in the establishment of family-friendly DEI measures. Despite heavy workloads, they demonstrate that caregiving and leadership can coexist, provided they receive adequate organizational support. Their example underlines that parental leave is no longer a deviation from professional life but increasingly an integral aspect of a new male managerial identity. Successful DEI strategies will promote and leverage this credible role modeling, encouraging others to follow suit and normalizing the practice. Such a cultural shift towards a modern and inclusive workplace culture will ultimately lay the foundation for a gender-equitable division of caregiving responsibilities.

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## Appendix

### Appendix 1: Interview Participants

Interview Participants						
#	Name	Quote	Industry	Parental Leave Usage	Duration of Parental Leave	Date
1	DF	MA1	Manufacturing	Yes (three times)	Three times, two months each	16.11.24
2	NO	MA2	Consulting	No (with vacation)	Five weeks of vacation	19.11.24
3	MB	MA3	Consulting	Yes (twice)	Once for one month, once for two months	20.11.24
4	BF	MA4	Telecommunications	Yes (twice)	Twice, two months each	24.11.24
5	JM	MA5	Energy	Yes (once)	Two months	25.11.24
6	SF	MA6	Environmental Services	Yes (once)	Two years in total	26.11.24
7	MV	MA7	Food Logistics	Yes (twice)	Twice, two months each	27.11.24
8	JW	MA8	Telecommunications	No (3 times)	-	28.11.24
9	AW	MA9	Technology	No (Once), Yes (Once)	Three months (two months, four weeks of vacation)	02.12.24
10	CF	MA10	Consumer Goods	Yes (once)	Eight months in total	06.12.24

## Appendix 2: Semi-Structured Interview Guideline

#	Topic	Introduction
1	<b>Introduction</b>	<p>This protocol has been designed to allow for follow-up questions such as, "Can you provide more detail on that?" or "Why do you think that is the case?" to encourage deeper responses and insights.</p> <p>At the beginning, I introduce myself to the participant. Before starting the interview, I ask for permission to record the session to ensure the quality and reliability of the data collected. In addition, I ask if they wish to remain anonymous and clarify which of their personal data can be disclosed as part of the study.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Please introduce yourself briefly, including your background and current role.</li> <li>2. Did you take parental leave while you were in the manager position?</li> </ol>
2	<b>Parental Leave Design</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3. How familiar are you with the eligibility criteria for taking parental leave in your organization?</li> <li>4. Did the payment levels during your parental leave influence your decision to take it? If so, how did this impact your decision?</li> <li>5. How flexible is your organization's policy when it comes to parental leave arrangements (e.g., part-time leave, phased return)?</li> <li>6. Does your company provide support or coordination with early childhood education and care (ECEC) services for employees taking parental leave?</li> </ol>
3	<b>Workplace Stigmatization</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>7. How is parental leave generally perceived in your workplace?</li> <li>8. Did taking parental leave impact your career progression or opportunities for promotion? If so, could you share an example?</li> <li>9. Have you ever felt or observed judgment from colleagues or superiors when it comes to taking parental leave?</li> <li>10. Is there an internal stigma among male managers when deciding to take parental leave? Why or why not?</li> </ol>

4	<b>Organizational Support</b>	<p>11. How does your organization communicate its parental leave policies? Would you say these policies are clear and well-understood?</p> <p>12. What types of informal support have you received from managers or colleagues regarding parental leave?</p> <p>13. Are there resources or training programs in place that help employees balance work and parental responsibilities?</p> <p>14. How do you perceive senior management’s attitude toward DEI policies and their support for parental leave?</p>
5	<b>Cultural Norms</b>	<p>15. What are the main gender expectations in your workplace related to parental leave?</p> <p>16. How do societal attitudes about fathers taking parental leave influence decision-making in your organization?</p>
6	<b>Personal Motivations and Experiences</b>	<p>20. What factors most influence your decision to take or not take parental leave?</p> <p>21. How has the decision to take or not take parental leave impacted your work-life balance and relationships with family and colleagues?</p>
7	<b>Closing</b>	<p>22. Do you think attitudes towards fathers taking parental leave are changing? If so, how do you envision this evolving in the future?</p> <p>23. What recommendations would you give to organizations to better support male employees considering parental leave?</p> <p>At the conclusion of the interview, I thank the participant for their valuable time and insights, emphasizing the importance of their contribution to the study. I inform them that a summary of the interview will be shared with them via email, allowing them to review and verify the accuracy and validity of the information provided. Finally, I confirm if they have any further questions or require clarification regarding the interview process or the next step.</p>

### **Appendix 3: Interview Transcripts**

Interview transcripts can be accessed through the following link: <https://shorturl.at/ueD8r>

In case of difficulties, please contact the researcher: [s-sfechtig@ucp.pt](mailto:s-sfechtig@ucp.pt).

## Appendix 4: Data Structure Analysis based on Gioia Methodology

Interview Findings		
First-Order Concepts - Direct Quotations	Second-Order Themes	Aggregate Dimensions
"No, I managed everything using vacation time. I took five weeks of continuous leave, or almost six, right after the birth." MA2	Strategic Planning and Flexibility	Flexibility and Adaptability in Parental Leave Design
"For my first son, I took one month of parental leave. For my second son, I took another month during the summer and plan to take an additional month in December." MA3		
"I took one month of parental leave after the birth, and I still have seven more months to take." MA10		
"I took parental leave twice: once for the birth of my daughter and once for my son. For my daughter, I took three consecutive months when she was about a year old, and for my son, I took two months immediately after his birth." MA4		
"I took six weeks of parental leave after my child was born, which amounted to two consecutive months." MA5		
"I was away from work for twelve weeks because I managed to combine it with vacation days and flexible working hours before and after." MA9		
"In total, I took two years of parental leave." MA6		
"Twice, once for each child, taking two months of leave after the birth of each." MA7		
"I have three children and declined parental leave for all three." MA8		
"I took parental leave three times in total for my two children: once in 2024, once in 2023, and once in 2021. Altogether, it amounted to six months—three times two months. I never considered taking more." MA1		

<p>"I scheduled my parental leave to align with carnival season. As I am very active in the forest and with the carnival guild, I always took leave in the spring." MA1</p>	<p>Personal and Professional Alignment</p>	
<p>"We wanted to use the summer months for traveling. The decision was purely personal and uninfluenced by any professional obligations or commitments." MA4</p>		
<p>"This was a personal decision. There were no specific professional projects or obligations that influenced this choice" MA7</p>		
<p>"I took a total of seven months of parental leave. My wife and I decided to split it equally. There were no professional factors influencing this decision." MA10</p>		
<p>"My wife and I made the decision together, and professional considerations did not play a role." MA5</p>		
<p>"Two months worked better for me due to my career planning and the circumstances at the time" MA3</p>		
<p>"Yes, the level of compensation influenced the length of my parental leave." MA9</p>	<p>Financial Aspects in Decision-Making</p>	
<p>"Absolutely. I earn a good salary, so taking too long off would MA2t have made financial sense, especially given our fixed expenses. My wife earns significantly less." MA2</p>		
<p>"Yes, definitely. The parental allowance enabled us to finance this period. Although it wasn't as high as my regular salary, it provided basic security" MA4</p>		
<p>"No, but thanks to extended parental benefit payments from my employer, I was able to take more parental leave." MA10</p>		
<p>"Compensation definitely played a role. Taking a longer leave would have been more financially challenging." MA5</p>		

<p>"Yes, absolutely. Beyond two months, I would no longer have received parental benefits, which would have meant financing the extended time out of our own pocket." MA7</p>			
<p>"No, compensation was not a factor for me." MA8</p>			
<p>"No, the amount of compensation had no impact on my decision." MA6</p>			
<p>"No, this decision wasn't about money. For me, it wasn't about finances" MA3</p>			
<p>"I transitioned from full-time work to a complete break and then returned to full-time." MA2</p>	<p>Re-entry after Paternal Leave</p>		
<p>"Initially, I worked 28 hours, then I was completely away for three months, and afterward, I resumed work at 28 hours a week" MA6</p>			
<p>"The policies are very flexible. I was able to take either full parental leave or part-time parental leave. For the part-time option, I had to negotiate a bit more as it is less common, but overall, it was feasible and well-supported." MA4</p>			
<p>"My employer is very flexible. There are many options, but I went from being completely off to fully back on the job" MA10</p>			
<p>"The policies were very flexible. Part-time parental leave, a phased return - 100%, very flexible overall. I was fully on parental leave, following the standard arrangement." MA9</p>			
<p>"Very flexible. There were options like part-time parental leave or a phased return. However, I chose to take the full two months and then return directly to full-time work." MA5</p>			
<p>"I went from 100% to 0% and then directly re-entered." MA7</p>			
<p>"Yes, such options exist. They were explained to me, but I did not pursue them. I always returned to work fully after my parental leave." MA1</p>			

<p>"I simply transitioned from 100% to 0% and then back from 0% to 100% again." MA3</p>			
<p>"Many envy us for having such good policies in Germany. You retain your job and still receive money during parental leave. That's really good here" MA3</p>	<p>Government Regulations and Support</p>		
<p>"The German state regulates this very well overall and offers great opportunities for families." MA10</p>			
<p>"I'm glad it's regulated by the state. If companies had the choice to make it voluntary, it would be less accepted" MA1</p>			
<p>"It was also great that the state provided financial assistance." MA7</p>			
<p>"It is entirely normal. In our company, it gradually became common for managers to take parental leave." MA8</p>	<p>Workplace Perception</p>	<p>Norms and Values in the Context of Parental Leave</p>	
<p>"It's not seen as 'good' everywhere." MA2</p>			
<p>"I would say almost everyone does it nowadays. I have seen many colleagues take parental leave when they had children, and I can only think of one case in my environment where someone did not take paternity leave." MA7</p>			
<p>"It is perceived positively and has become entirely normal. It would be unusual for a father not to take parental leave." MA4</p>			
<p>"Taking parental leave as a manager is not an issue in our company." MA10</p>			
<p>"The perception is overwhelmingly positive. It's acknowledged that fathers want to take responsibility" MA5</p>			
<p>"In the current company, it is completely normal. At my previous company, however, there were often comments like, 'You have a wife; does it really have to be you?' MA6</p>			
<p>"When I took parental leave, it was normal. Today, in 2024, it is viewed more critically and individually." MA9</p>			

<p>"What stood out was that everyone seemed to notice that I took parental leave twice and not just for one month." MA1</p>		
<p>"It's not a sprint but a marathon, requiring continuous effort. A significant part of the challenge lies in addressing stigma." MA3</p>	<p>Stigmatization among Male Managers</p>	
<p>"For younger managers, often already in their 30s, this is completely normal." MA1</p>		
<p>"I have not noticed anything like that." MA2</p>		
<p>"Among younger executives, it's not an issue, but I believe older ones still see it differently" MA6</p>		
<p>"No, I don't think there is an internal stigma among managers." MA7</p>		
<p>"Not in my immediate environment. I think there are areas in our company where it is viewed much more critically." MA10</p>		
<p>"I think it strongly depends on the company culture. In my case, I didn't experience any direct stigma." MA8</p>		
<p>"I think senior-level and C-level executives, particularly among older generations, tend to view it critically" MA4</p>		
<p>"There is some stigma, especially when parental leave is used for activities like traveling the world. However, if it is about supporting a partner's re-entry into the workforce, it is more accepted." MA9</p>		
<p>"I would say, definitely not nowadays." MA8</p>		
<p>"I was promised a job, but in the end, it was denied for questionable reasons. One argument was: 'We always said children are a problem.' Perhaps my parental leave played a role." MA1</p>	<p>Professional Consequences</p>	
<p>"On the contrary, I experienced MA2 disadvantages. They always asked how I was doing and how everything was going." MA2</p>		
<p>"No, I did not experience any negative impact on my career. I did not feel disadvantaged in any way." MA7</p>		

"No, there were no negative effects on my career." MA4		
"No, not at all." MA10		
"No, not at all." MA8		
"No, not at all." MA9		
"No, not at all. I did not notice any differences regarding my career before or after parental leave." MA6		
"No, not at all. I didn't notice any difference in terms of my career, either before or after parental leave" MA3		
"The guidelines were openly available on the intranet and clearly communicated." MA8	Support through Company Policies	Organizational Role as a Leader in Equality
"There is a page on the intranet where you can find all the information. You can also call HR, and they will explain everything in detail." MA2		
"The company provides many sources of information. There are intranets and even chatbots that quickly deliver relevant information. Additionally, there are specialized contacts for topics like parental leave, maternity protection, and parental benefits." MA7		
"All our processes and procedures are documented on the intranet, where you can find everything." MA6		
"It was relatively transparent on the intranet. There's a lot of information you can access independently, and HR was helpful for individual questions." MA9		
"I didn't find it very transparent. I had to reach out to HR several times, and after multiple inquiries, I received an FAQ that is currently under development" MA10		
"Our company has structured and communicated its parental leave policies very well. There is comprehensive documentation on the intranet describing all steps and conditions. Additionally, HR is always available for questions." MA5		
"The policies are very clear and easily accessible. In our company, there is a dedicated intranet for all HR-related matters, including parental leave. You can also find all necessary forms and additional resources there." MA4		

<p>"It wasn't really an issue. The first time was a bit more complicated, but HR was very well informed." MA1</p>		
<p>"I simply looked it up on the intranet, which is well-organized. There, I found a policy that outlined all the important details, such as what to consider and how to obtain the forms." MA3</p>		
<p>"We have a managing director who doesn't find it funny at all" MA1</p>	<p>Support from Supervisors</p>	
<p>"When I became a father, my boss was very supportive and happy for me." MA6</p>		
<p>"Yes, he thought it was good. If I had taken it, he would have supported it." MA8</p>		
<p>"In both cases, I had supervisors who fully supported my decision. Both were women who were happy that I took parental leave. They encouraged me and faced no resistance or negative reactions." MA4</p>		
<p>"My direct supervisor was very supportive of my decision. She has a child herself and worked part-time after the birth. She understood my situation and supported me in taking parental leave." MA10</p>		
<p>"My supervisor was very supportive and positive from the beginning." MA5</p>		
<p>"My supervisor reacted very positively. We discussed together how to organize my absence, who would take over which tasks, and which topics we might pause. This support helped me take my parental leave without any problems" MA7</p>		
<p>"It was positive to neutral. My supervisor said, 'Okay, let's plan this.' It wasn't dismissive but a pragmatic approach." MA9</p>		
<p>"Absolutely relaxed. As I said, he has three children himself, so he was very easygoing. I think it helps that he had done it himself." MA2</p>		
<p>"We had a manager, which was me, and a deputy who took over the additional workload." MA6</p>	<p>Managing Additional Workload</p>	
<p>"The project work was mainly taken over by the project team. I would say the tasks were evenly distributed across the team." MA3</p>		

<p>"For the first month, there was a replacement arrangement. For the longer parental leave, we found a successor." MA10</p>		
<p>"My team leaders took on many tasks, especially in meetings. I completed some work myself in the evenings or on weekends because I couldn't fully delegate certain leadership responsibilities" MA4</p>		
<p>"My tasks were managed by my deputy and the team." MA5</p>		
<p>"There were replacement arrangements. Some projects were paused, and the most critical tasks were handled by a colleague." MA7</p>		
<p>"One of the team leaders fully assumed my role, and he was enthusiastic about it." MA9</p>		
<p>"I appointed two sub-project managers, who I had trained beforehand." MA2</p>		
<p>"The work was handled by my team." MA1</p>		
<p>"The biggest problem remains societal stigma. When a man takes parental leave, it is often questioned." MA3</p>	<p>Traditional Gender Roles</p>	<p>Persistence and Disruption of Traditional Gender Roles</p>
<p>"I know men who don't take parental leave because their wives don't trust them to manage it. The traditional role of the man working and the woman taking care of the child is still deeply rooted in people's minds." MA9</p>		
<p>"In our company, it is very balanced." MA6</p>		
<p>"The opportunities are the same for everyone, but there is a strong tendency for fathers to take only two months of leave as the norm." MA10</p>		
<p>"Longer periods are less common, but when someone takes this route, it's viewed positively." MA7</p>		

<p>"There are no officially communicated expectations, but one can observe that mothers typically take at least a year of parental leave and often return part-time afterward. Fathers almost always take parental leave, but usually only for two or three months, and then return to full-time work. This is the standard process in our company." MA4</p>				
<p>"I would say that traditional gender roles have not disappeared completely. There is still an expectation that fathers take shorter parental leave and quickly refocus on work." MA5</p>				
<p>"The traditional role model still dominates: women stay at home longer, and men take shorter leaves." MA9</p>				
<p>"In our company, it is still the case that women take parental leave, and men continue working." MA2</p>				
<p>"Women tend to stay at home more often. That reflects reality." MA1</p>				
<p>"I would say it is quite good. They ensure everything is fair." MA2</p>			Companies as Pioneers in Gender Equality	
<p>"Very progressive. The company actively promotes both parents taking parental leave. There are even programs like extra parental allowance supported by the company." MA7</p>				
<p>"I would classify the company as above average in terms of progressiveness. It is standard for both parents to take parental leave, including fathers. It is openly discussed, and there are no negative reactions. HR support and internal communication are excellent." MA4</p>				
<p>"Compared to many other companies in Germany, my employer is relatively progressive. There are clear policies and a culture that promotes parental leave." MA5</p>				

<p>"I think this is changing. I notice more and more fathers taking parental leave, even for two months or longer. It's becoming more accepted, although it's a slow process." MA10</p>			
<p>"As an attractive employer, the company intentionally contributes to breaking down gender silos and promoting an equal culture." MA1</p>			
<p>"Our company is extremely progressive in terms of corporate culture, guidelines, vision, and day-to-day practices." MA6</p>			
<p>"Our company is very, very progressive, to be honest." MA8</p>			
<p>"I believe it will continue to improve positively." MA1</p>	<p>Future Development of Parental Leave</p>		
<p>"The current 12-2 split or the clear predominance of mothers taking longer leave will likely persist." MA8</p>			
<p>"Yes, it is becoming more normalized." MA2</p>			
<p>"From my perspective, the attitude nowadays is that it is completely acceptable and almost equal, so I don't think there will be dramatic changes." MA8</p>			
<p>"I believe attitudes will shift positively. In my generation, people around 40, taking parental leave is already standard. Over the coming years, as this generation moves into leadership roles, the trend will continue to strengthen. External factors like economic pressure might slow it down, but overall, I see positive developments." MA4</p>			
<p>"Positive. I think it will change. I notice that more and more fathers are taking parental leave, at least for two months or longer. It is becoming increasingly accepted, even if it is a slow process." MA10</p>			
<p>"Positive. I think parental leave for fathers will eventually become as natural as it is for mothers." MA5</p>			

<p>"I believe the trend is moving in a positive direction. More fathers are taking parental leave. The question is whether the government will keep parental benefits attractive. If this support remains, attitudes will continue to improve." MA7</p>		
<p>"I think it is viewed more critically now than it was a few years ago. There is often skepticism about whether parental leave or flexible working arrangements are truly used for parenting or for self-optimization. This trend might lead to a more conservative approach, particularly in large companies." MA9</p>		
<p>"I am not yet sure in which direction things will develop after the last European elections." MA6</p>		
<p>"If you are managing a project, you don't want it disrupted by a long break. Parental leave is seen as a potential obstacle to career advancement." MA3</p>	<p>Barriers and Fears of Career Disadvantages</p>	<p>Barriers and Strategies for Utilizing Paternal Leave</p>
<p>"Often, it is: 'I am indispensable.' The fear of being overlooked for promotions or other positions lingers." MA1</p>		
<p>"Self-perception is a factor. And you've probably heard it before - money plays a role. My main motivation was the feeling that I had to do it all because I was indispensable, and things wouldn't run without me." MA8</p>		
<p>"The reason I didn't take more than eight weeks was that financial support would have been insufficient afterward. Many fear losing or altering their responsibilities or roles. People believe the company cannot function without them." MA9</p>		
<p>"I think many managers are concerned about missing something important during a longer absence. There is a fear of being overlooked or falling behind developments." MA7</p>		

<p>"Barrier one—which was also a factor for us - was financial loss. Barrier two was the potential for career setbacks." MA10</p>		
<p>"A primary reason is definitely financial. parental allowance often does not suffice to cover living expenses, especially in large cities." MA4</p>		
<p>"The biggest obstacles remain financial issues and career concerns. Additionally, many companies lack role models - male leaders who demonstrate that longer parental leave is possible without harming their careers." MA5</p>		
<p>"To be completely honest, it is better to stay closer to work. Financial considerations also played a role. We could have afforded longer parental leave, but there is a limited parental benefit system." MA7</p>		
<p>"Fear of losing promotion opportunities and financial stability." MA6</p>		
<p>"The fear of being absent from a crucial project is associated with long-term consequences." MA2</p>	<p>Encouraging Extended Parental Leave</p>	
<p>"Managers need better training to stop believing they are irreplaceable." MA1</p>		
<p>"Clear assurances that job security will not be jeopardized in these cases would help." MA8</p>		
<p>"Proactive approaches are necessary. Mandatory seminars for all leaders should be implemented, and senior management must lead by example." MA6</p>		
<p>"It should be proactive. Companies should enhance communication about the benefits of parental leave and make it clear that it has no career drawbacks." MA5</p>		
<p>"Companies should take proactive measures and financially support employees, as my employer does. Additionally, leaders should openly discuss their own parental leave to serve as role models." MA10</p>		

<p>"A proactive approach could help. A small gift for the child's birth paired with an information package. Create a culture that signals that parental leave is a given and has no negative consequences. Leaders should act as role models and demonstrate that parental leave is possible even in higher positions." MA7</p>		
<p>"Companies could develop models to facilitate managers' return. For instance, high potentials could temporarily take over roles to gain experience while securing the manager's responsibilities. This would ease the pressure and increase acceptance of longer parental leaves." AW</p>		
<p>"For instance, they could continue paying a portion of the salary or offer flexible repayment models to make longer parental leave more attractive. It is essential to support fathers, as they are often the primary earners." MA4</p>		
<p>"There is no proactive approach where the company suggests considering parental leave. A proactive approach, especially for managers, would definitely be beneficial." MA2</p>		
<p>"Employers could automatically send information or guidelines about parental leave when they are informed that an employee is expecting a child." MA3</p>		
<p>"I just wanted to take a break." MA1</p>	<p>Personal Reflections</p>	<p>Driving Change through Personal Experience</p>
<p>"There was nothing from the company's side against it. However, I belonged to the type of person who, unfortunately, didn't do it, which I regret today. I had this feeling that I absolutely needed to be in the office." MA8</p>		
<p>"Becoming a father was always a big wish for me. Watching my daughter grow up is a once-in-a-lifetime experience, and I wanted to take responsibility for that." MA6</p>		

<p>"When a baby arrives, it's a completely different experience for my wife, especially with the first child. It is very challenging. You have to find your rhythm and don't want to miss a single moment." MA2</p>		
<p>"Time with my children is more valuable to me than money, and that made the decision very clear." MA4</p>		
<p>"The bond with the child." MA10</p>		
<p>"Spending time with the family was the main factor in my decision to take parental leave." MA5</p>		
<p>"Time with the family was the main reason. It is a wonderful way for the family to grow together without the stress of work and private life." MA7</p>		
<p>"With my second child, I absolutely wanted to take parental leave because I hadn't done it with my first and later regretted it. It was important to me to spend time with my child and also to ease my wife's return to professional life." MA9</p>		
<p>"Spending time with the family and the children." MA3</p>		
<p>"I can only recommend parental leave to everyone." MA1</p>	<p>Recommendation for Parental Leave</p>	
<p>"I deeply regret not having done it." MA8</p>		
<p>"It was definitely the right decision, and I would do it the same way again." MA2</p>		
<p>"I want to emphasize how valuable this time was - for me as a father, for my child, and for our family. Parental leave should be seen as an opportunity, not just as a challenge." MA5</p>		
<p>"I would recommend everyone to take more parental leave. It is such a valuable time, and you won't regret it. I am even considering taking unpaid parental leave again." MA7</p>		

<p>“I can only recommend everyone to take parental leave. The time with the children is priceless, and you will regret it later if you miss this opportunity.” MA4</p>		
<p>"I would recommend parental leave to everyone." MA6</p>		
<p>"Parental leave is something everyone should take advantage of." MA9</p>		
<p>"Previously, I worked as a manager at another company, and the reaction there was, ‘Congratulations on the child, but you’re not planning to take parental leave, are you?’" MA3</p>		