

# Barriers to Involved Fathering in Hungary. Insights from the Father Survey Module of a Hungarian Birth Cohort Study

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Keywords: father; work-family conflict; egalitarian attitudes; workload; paternal involvement; Hungary

## Introduction

The positive effect of fathers' growing involvement in early childcare on their children's development and on the wellbeing of family members is well-established (Lamb et al. 1987). Behind this growing involvement lies a broader transformation in paternal roles, a recalibration of family dynamics, and a reconfiguration of fathers' work–family balance. However, this restructuring is not always seamless, and workplace demands do not necessarily accommodate the new challenges associated with new fatherhood. Men who become fathers may therefore find themselves caught in a conflict of expectations, as they strive to meet both the demands of the involved, nurturing father and those of the traditional male breadwinner model (Wall et al., 2007). In what follows, we examine the tensions inherent in this dual role within the Hungarian context, where shifts in gender role attitudes toward more egalitarian values are observable among both women and men (Murinkó, 2014), yet where economic pressures on fathers remain considerable (Hobson et al., 2011). Our treatment of the concept of *fathering* in this analysis examines the dynamic interplay between practical actions and value-based factors, in relation to broader aspects of *family functioning*. Specifically, we consider the interrelationship among a man's roles as father, partner, and breadwinner, which collectively shape diverse *fathering patterns* (Wall et al., 2007). In this regard, the concept of *father involvement* can be extended to include differences in *time use* between mothers and fathers (Bianchi and Milkie, 2010; Henz, 2022; McGinnity and Russell, 2018; Yeung et al., 2001), as well as variations in the nature of parental activities (Gaunt, 2005)—for instance, the differentiation between play and caregiving as distinct maternal and paternal tasks (Parke, 1996; Lamb, 2000). The present study contributes to this literature by examining the associations between fathers' involvement in childcare, their attitudes, and the timing of their engagement across weekdays and weekends.

## Theoretical background

The theoretical framework of our study is based on the psychosocial model of father involvement developed by Cabrera et al. (2014), which assumes reciprocal influences between fathers' individual characteristics—such as their social background, behaviours, and attitudes—those of other family members, and the surrounding structural factors, such as working, cultural, and economic conditions (Diniz et al., 2021). The examination of paternal involvement in this study is situated within the conceptual framework of *fathering*. In line with Doucet's (2013) definition, we understand *fathering* as *relational sets of practices and identities*. Accordingly, our analytical approach includes not only the practical dimension (i.e., the gendered division of caregiving tasks), but also fathers' gender role attitudes. In conceptualizing *fathering* as a set

of caregiving practices, we draw on parental investment theory as a source of theoretical grounding (Fox and Bruce, 2001). The operationalization of paternal involvement in our study follows the quantifiable dimensions approach focusing on the frequency of *actual one-on-one interaction* with the child—caregiving activities that require direct engagement (Lamb, 2000). The development of modern, involved fatherhood throughout the twentieth century has been shaped by a range of social processes (Cabrera et al., 2000). Among the most significant of these is the increasing rate of female labour-force participation (Lamb, 2000), which—alongside other macro-level factors such as economic growth, cultural context, and welfare systems—has shaped the division of domestic labour (Fuwa, 2004). The value and practice shifts associated with these societal transformations have not occurred uniformly; rather, they are closely linked to variations in socioeconomic background (Frank and Frenette, 2021). International data indicate that although the gender gap in the division of labour between parents has significantly narrowed since the 1960s, the majority of household and childcare responsibilities continue to be carried out by women across all countries (Bianchi et al., 2000; Murinkó, 2014). Men’s participation in domestic work may also be hindered by women’s “gatekeeping role” (Allen and Hawkins, 1999). Trends in gender and family attitudes across Europe suggest a measurable correlation between the acceptance of gender inequalities and the distribution of childcare tasks (Murinkó, 2014). The effort to reconcile work and family expectations often leads to elevated stress levels among parents following the birth of a child (Bellavia and Frone, 2005). Hobson and Fahlén (2009), using ESS data, found that most fathers would prefer to reduce their workload—even at the cost of lower pay. Their findings also highlighted the relatively disadvantaged position of Central and Eastern European fathers in achieving work–family balance, due to both economic constraints and prevailing normative expectations. The actual reduction in-working hours appears to be more likely the mother’s response to work–family conflict (Reynolds, 2005). Workplace norms can also be understood as a meaningful factor in shaping or explaining fathers’ involvement (Takács, 2020). According to Yeh et. al (2019) fathers show different involvement during weekdays and the weekend, which is shaped by their educational level, number of children, and the interaction between education and income. Based on data from the 2005 European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS), Meil (2013) found in addition, that men’s involvement in childcare is negatively correlated with their working hours. According to the 2006 Eurobarometer survey comparing European countries, values regarding maternal employment versus childcare are more conservative in Hungary than the EU-25 average. For Hungarian respondents, the mother is perceived as the primary caregiver of children, often prioritizing childcare over paid work, and thus occupies a more dominant role within the family (European Commission, 2006). At the same time, fathering roles are showing signs of change. Expectations traditionally associated with male roles—such as providing security—continue to exert influence and these coexist with emerging, non-traditional norms and expectations (Spéder, 2011). As a result, men are increasingly subject to a dual set of expectations—a “double burden”—which places simultaneous demands on them to fulfil both traditional and modern fatherhood roles (Makay and Spéder, 2018). Moreover, efforts to achieve a work–family balance are hindered by labour market and economic constraints, which tend to push families with young children toward increased work intensity in order to ensure financial security (Hobson et al., 2011). At the same time, Hungary’s relatively generous parental leave policies have long encouraged mothers to

remain at home for extended periods after childbirth (Makay, 2015), reinforcing a traditional male-breadwinner model during early childhood (Makay, 2023).

## **Research questions**

The overview of previous studies has shown that the relationship between fathers' involvement in child-related tasks, his working patterns and fathering attitudes is not straightforward. Our aim is therefore to disentangle this relationship and to answer the following research question: How do egalitarian gender role attitudes and paternal workload influence fathers' involvement in early childcare, taking into account potential differences between weekdays and weekends?

## **Data and methods**

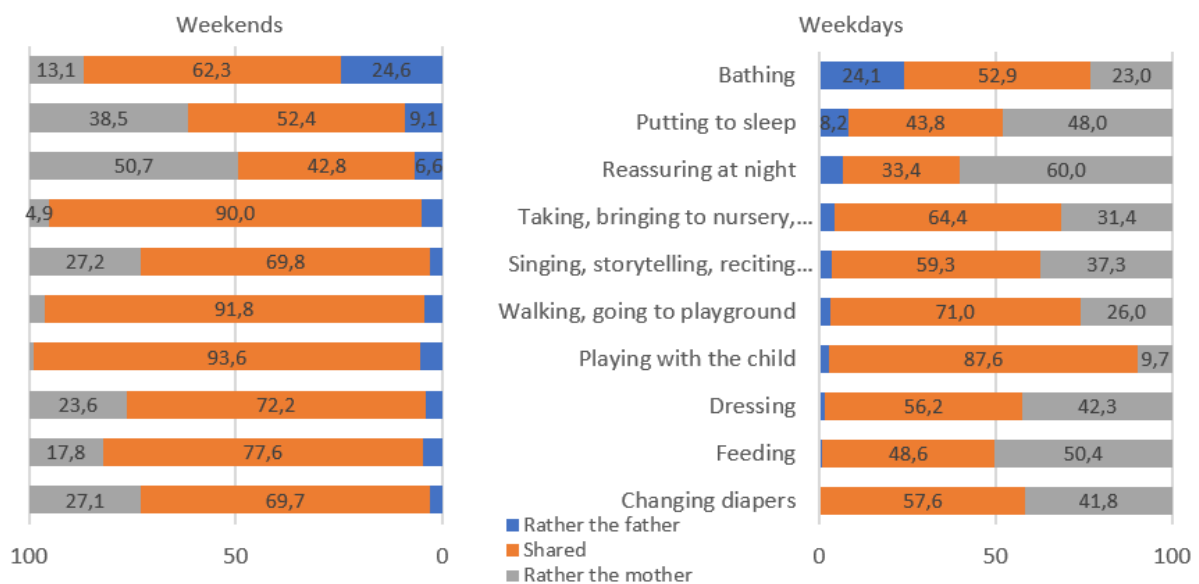
This study is based on data from the third wave of Cohort '18 – Growing Up in Hungary data collection. Cohort '18 is a large-scale, longitudinal, nationwide, and multidisciplinary research program launched by the Hungarian Demographic Research Institute (HDRI) (Veroszta et al., 2020). Data collection began with 8,287 pregnant women at the second trimester of their pregnancy whose expected delivery dates fell between April 2018 and April 2019. In the third wave of the study, the data collection was extended to include fathers when their child was 18 months old ( $n = 1,992$ ), using computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI). The analytical database used in this study is based on the individual-level linkage of fathers' responses to those of their respective partners (i.e., the mothers). Matrix weighting was applied to the dataset, based on the educational attainment of both mothers and fathers as recorded in the prenatal wave of the study. After the treatment of missing values, our analysis includes the responses of 1,783 fathers. The outcome variable measures how many of ten child-related tasks were either performed solely by the father or shared with the mother. As a dependent variable, a task is coded as "shared" if the father reported either doing it mostly himself or performing it jointly with the mother. As an independent variable two complementary approaches are used to assess workload of fathers. First, we examine work-family balance by looking at levels of subjective work-family conflict, based on the extent to which work demands are perceived to interfere with family life. This is captured using two items commonly employed in cross-national surveys such as the Generations and Gender Survey (Gauthier et al., 2020, Szalma and Takács, 2017). The second approach to measuring fathers' workload relies on an objective indicator: the number of average weekly working hours, as self-reported by fathers. Attitudes related to mothers and fathers role were operationalized using four survey items that capture distinct dimensions of parental responsibility on Likert-scale, constructing two formative indexes—one for the father and one for the mother—following the approach outlined by Edwards and Bagozzi (2000). Besides, a set of socio-economic control variables were included. Given that the dependent variable (the number of child-related tasks shared) is continuous, we employed Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression models in STATA following stepwise modelling strategy. The results are presented as unstandardized regression coefficients ( $\beta$ ), which reflect the expected change in the number of shared tasks associated with a one-unit increase in continuous predictor variables and the difference in shared tasks relative to the reference category for categorical variables. We estimated separate sets of models for two distinct time

frames: weekdays and weekends, capturing variation in paternal involvement across the workweek.

## Results

The mean number of shared tasks as reported by the father is 6.2 on weekdays ( $SD = 2.29$ ) and 7.8 on weekends ( $SD = 1.76$ ), indicating a substantial increase in paternal involvement during the weekend. The higher standard deviation on weekdays suggests greater variability in fathers' involvement, potentially due to differing time constraints or workload demands during the week. At both time frames, fathers' participation in caregiving is most pronounced in bathing their children, while their sole responsibility for other tasks remains limited.

Figure 1. Distribution of child-related tasks on weekends and weekdays (%)



Model 1 presents the results of an OLS regression examining the influence of work-family conflict on the number of parenting tasks shared by fathers. Work-family conflict significantly affects the number of tasks fathers share, with notable differences between weekdays and weekends. Results show that fathers experiencing very high work-family conflict share 0.77 fewer tasks on weekdays ( $\beta = -0.767$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) compared to those with moderate conflict, representing a 12% reduction relative to the average number of shared tasks on weekdays (6.2 tasks). On weekends, they share 0.83 fewer tasks ( $\beta = -0.832$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), corresponding to an 11% reduction relative to the average of 7.8 shared tasks on weekends. Fathers with high work-family conflict share 0.34 fewer tasks on weekdays ( $\beta = -0.338$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ; a 5% reduction) and 0.33 fewer tasks on weekends ( $\beta = -0.330$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; a 4% reduction), compared to those with moderate conflict. Low work-family conflict is associated with an increase of 0.45 tasks on weekdays ( $\beta = 0.447$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; a 7% increase), but this effect is not statistically significant on weekends. These findings suggest that higher levels of work-family conflict are consistently associated with lower paternal involvement, both on weekdays and weekends, with somewhat

more pronounced effects observed during the weekdays. In Model 2, which includes fathers' weekly working hours, the significant effects of work-family conflict on shared tasks persist. This indicates that both subjective work-family conflict and extensive working hours (over 50 hours per week) are important barriers to paternal involvement in childcare. In Model 3 which includes both fathers' and mothers' views on paternal roles, the effects of work-family conflict and working hours on shared tasks remain consistent with previous models. Moreover, each one-unit increase in the fathering index is associated with sharing 0.66 more tasks on weekdays ( $\beta = 0.658, p < 0.001$ ), a 10.6% increase relative to the weekday mean of 6.2 tasks, and 0.39 more tasks on weekends ( $\beta = 0.390, p < 0.001$ ), a 5% increase relative to the weekend mean of 7.8 tasks. Similarly, each one-unit increase in the mother's fathering index is linked to sharing 0.31 more tasks on weekdays ( $\beta = 0.307, p < 0.01$ ) and 0.23 more tasks on weekends ( $\beta = 0.233, p < 0.01$ ), representing increases of 5% and 3%, respectively. Results indicate, that while attitudes toward fatherhood are important, structural factors such as work-family conflict and long working hours continue to independently influence paternal involvement.

Table 1: OLS regression results

		Model 0		Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
		Weekdays	Weekends	Weekdays	Weekends	Weekdays	Weekends	Weekdays	Weekends
Work-family conflict (Ref. Moderate)	Very high	-0.576*** (0.184)	-0.696*** (0.148)	-0.767*** (0.180)	-0.832*** (0.149)	-0.638*** (0.184)	-0.702*** (0.152)	-0.543*** (0.184)	-0.643*** (0.149)
	High	-0.274* (0.163)	-0.246** (0.116)	-0.338** (0.165)	-0.330*** (0.115)	-0.289* (0.165)	-0.281** (0.113)	-0.241 (0.163)	-0.252** (0.114)
	Low	0.423*** (0.163)	0.00825 (0.122)	0.447*** (0.164)	-0.00370 (0.120)	0.444*** (0.162)	0.0106 (0.119)	0.367** (0.161)	-0.0366 (0.119)
Fathers' weekly working hours (Ref. 40h or less)	41-45 hours	-0.266 (0.175)	0.0760 (0.121)			-0.166 (0.170)	0.116 (0.120)	-0.240 (0.170)	0.0701 (0.120)
	46-50 hours	-0.0106 (0.153)	-0.0268 (0.114)			-0.116 (0.155)	-0.0850 (0.112)	-0.113 (0.152)	-0.0830 (0.112)
	51+ hours	-0.494*** (0.172)	-0.431*** (0.140)			-0.631*** (0.179)	-0.522*** (0.144)	-0.600*** (0.173)	-0.505*** (0.141)
Fathers' fathering index		0.550*** (0.116)	0.301*** (0.1000)					0.658*** (0.116)	0.390*** (0.0969)
Mothers' fathering index		0.198 (0.132)	0.133 (0.0964)					0.307** (0.131)	0.233** (0.0952)
Fathers' employment status (ref. Employed)	Other			-0.347* (0.197)	-0.170 (0.153)	-0.307 (0.196)	-0.130 (0.151)	-0.246 (0.191)	-0.0872 (0.149)
Fathers' sector of employment (Ref. Private)	Other			0.117 (0.149)	-0.0332 (0.119)	0.120 (0.146)	-0.0175 (0.117)	0.0969 (0.143)	-0.0319 (0.116)
Father has subordinates (Ref. No)	Yes			0.320*** (0.119)	0.217** (0.102)	0.361*** (0.120)	0.246** (0.102)	0.390*** (0.119)	0.263*** (0.100)
Fathers' age (Ref. 30-39)	18-29			0.387** (0.183)	0.231* (0.140)	0.376** (0.182)	0.225 (0.138)	0.447** (0.180)	0.275** (0.137)
	40+			-0.205 (0.150)	-0.404*** (0.117)	-0.224 (0.148)	-0.419*** (0.116)	-0.226 (0.146)	-0.419*** (0.115)
Fathers' education (Ref. Medium)	Low			-0.0324 (0.149)	0.217* (0.119)	0.0227 (0.150)	0.281** (0.118)	0.0857 (0.151)	0.318*** (0.118)
	High			-0.158 (0.143)	0.336*** (0.106)	-0.188 (0.142)	0.300*** (0.106)	-0.220 (0.140)	0.280*** (0.104)
Childs' birth order as for the father (Ref. 1st child)	Higher order birth			0.277**	0.0624	0.281**	0.0665	0.275**	0.0635

Sex of the child (Ref. Boy)	Girl			(0.125)	(0.0984)	(0.124)	(0.0978)	(0.123)	(0.0973)
				-0.286**	0.0275	-0.271**	0.0319	-0.263**	0.0370
				(0.119)	(0.0909)	(0.118)	(0.0899)	(0.116)	(0.0889)
Other children outside hh father (Ref. No)	Yes			-0.523*	0.0156	-0.511*	0.0249	-0.487*	0.0413
				(0.270)	(0.188)	(0.264)	(0.185)	(0.249)	(0.179)
New childbirth since cohort child (Ref. No)	Yes			-0.0269	0.409*	-0.0482	0.387*	-0.0236	0.403*
				(0.375)	(0.209)	(0.369)	(0.211)	(0.354)	(0.212)
Mothers' education (Ref. Medium)	Low			0.195	-0.0487	0.161	-0.0779	0.302*	0.0136
				(0.184)	(0.143)	(0.183)	(0.142)	(0.182)	(0.139)
	High			-0.0279	-0.143	-0.0797	-0.195*	-0.131	-0.231**
				(0.139)	(0.106)	(0.139)	(0.107)	(0.138)	(0.106)
Mothers' activity (Ref. Non-working)	Working			0.345*	-0.0857	0.395**	-0.0358	0.343*	-0.0750
				(0.186)	(0.175)	(0.186)	(0.174)	(0.183)	(0.170)
Constant		4.165***	6.789***	6.277***	7.950***	6.418***	8.009***	3.401***	6.055***
		(-0.549)	(-0.43)	(0.190)	(0.138)	(0.200)	(0.150)	(0.577)	(0.428)
Observations		1,783	1,783	1,783	1,783	1,783	1,783	1,783	1,783
R-squared		0.059	0.052	0.059	0.058	0.069	0.072	0.094	0.089

Robust standard errors in parentheses. \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$ . Source: Cohort'18 HDRI. Own calculations.

## Conclusions

The significance of the results of this study lies in its ability to disentangle the relative influence of gender-role attitudes and work-related constraints on paternal involvement in caregiving, considering that the caregiver and breadwinner role of the fathers collectively shape their paternal behaviour. The analysis provides a nuanced understanding of the conditions under which Hungarian fathers engage in early childcare. One of the most robust findings is that fathers' own attitudes toward their paternal role emerge as one of the strongest predictors of involvement in caregiving tasks. This underscores the importance of internalized norms in shaping caregiving behaviour, even when accounting for structural factors such as work-family conflict and working hours. Moreover, the study highlights the structural limits of these values: even when egalitarian attitudes are present, high levels of work-family conflict and long working hours substantially hinder paternal engagement. Importantly, the results challenge the assumption that fathers can compensate for limited weekday involvement by increasing their participation on weekends, revealing instead that time constraints persist across the week.

The findings point to a broader conclusion: while the mindset of Hungarian families with very young children appears to be shifting toward more egalitarian values regarding the division of caregiving responsibilities, the heavy work-related burdens placed on fathers continue to reinforce traditional divisions of labor—ultimately keeping mothers disproportionately responsible for childcare within the household. Interventions that promote positive attitudes toward paternal involvement, reduce work-family conflict, and limit long working hours—particularly those exceeding 50 hours per week—could significantly enhance fathers' participation in childcare tasks. Policies supporting work-life balance, such as flexible working arrangements or reduced overtime, may be especially effective in achieving this goal.

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