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Perceptions and Attitudes Pertaining to the Uptake of Paternity Leave in the United Arab Emirates

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Abstract

This paper investigates how management attitudes within companies influence the uptake of Paternity Leave (PL) and the request for flexible working arrangements among men, contributing to family care. It explores the flexibility stigma and gender stereotypes that act as barriers to men taking PL, referencing global examples to underscore the relevance of incentivized leaves and supportive leadership. The study focuses on balancing work-life responsibilities and challenges the notion that effective fatherhood equates to financial provision alone. It also examines the phenomenon of pluralistic ignorance, where men's perceptions of colleagues' attitudes impact their decisions about PL.

Perceptions and Attitudes Pertaining to the Uptake of Paternity Leave in the United Arab Emirates

The concept of gender roles, deeply rooted in societal constructs and expectations, impacts how men and women engage in both their professional and family lives. Traditional beliefs often dictate that men should primarily be the breadwinners, while women are expected to prioritize home-making (Bornstein, 2013; Lindsey, 2015). These stereotypes contribute to women typically taking career breaks for parenting, whereas men continue their professional roles. This phenomenon has been subject to evolution and critique, as contemporary family dynamics increasingly encourage a shared parenting responsibility, with men becoming more involved at home and women continuing their career progression post-childbirth (Biernat & Kobrynowicz, 1997; Marks & Palkovitz, 2004; Williams, 2000).

Evidence indicates that in many cultures, the maintenance of this status quo is no longer sufficient (e.g., Coltrane et al., 2013; Gartzia et al., 2018; Miyajima & Yamaguchi, 2017; Petts & Knoester, 2018; Petts, Knoester & Li, 2020; Rege & Solli, 2013; Smeaton, Ray & Knight, 2014; Williams et al., 2013) as many men are now opting to take less traditional, more active roles in co-parenting as the new involved father. Meanwhile, women return to the workplace to pursue ongoing career success post-partum (Biernat & Kobrynowicz, 1997; Marks & Palkovitz, 2004; Williams, 2000 as cited in Williams et al., 2013).

The bonding done with primary caregivers in the first two years of a child's life is linked to long-term mental wellbeing and children who become happier, more independent, and resilient adults (Winston & Chicot, 2016). Bonding with both parents is essential, and from a sociological perspective, fathers and mothers should both be encouraged to take time to connect with their young children.

Research indicates that gender roles are evolving at home, but the workplace is slow to follow suit to the point that there is a legitimate "mismatch between the workplace and the workforce" (Coltrane et al., 2013, p. 280); more commonly, men demonstrate the desire to be an involved parent, indicating the cultural shift that is gaining momentum (Coltrane & Adams, 2008; Williams, 2010). Nonetheless, the workplace harbours beliefs that perpetuate a fatherhood premium and a motherhood penalty where employed mothers are maternally profiled as less focused on work. Yet, research indicates that the opposite is true; working mothers tend to be more focused and work more intensively than their childless counterparts (Kmec, 2011). Contrastingly, men are often occupationally rewarded when they become fathers, but at the expense of being involved with their family life (Coltrane 1989, 1996 in Coltrane et al., 2013). Ironically, men who discuss their families at work are often perceived as being less serious about work (Coltrane et al., 2013), avail negative performance reviews, get fewer promotions, and incur salary penalties (Judiesch & Lyness, 1999; as cited in Gartzia et al., 2018). In addition to this, they have lower perceived commitment and therefore fewer organizational rewards (Allen et al., 1994 as cited in Gartzia et al., 2018) to the point that it is predicted that men who express a desire to be more family-oriented or take on a new fatherhood persona would likely be more harshly judged than women purely because

of gender stereotypes and the flexibility stigma (Coltrane et al., 2013).

The flexibility stigma refers to negative perceptions around workers that do not fit the ideal worker mold, which has traditionally been defined as those who put work before family, whereas presentism indicates dedication and hard work (Gartzia et al., 2018). “[Men] trigger severe flexibility stigma if they signal that caregiving responsibilities impinge in any way on their jobs (Allen, 2001; Berdahl & Moon, 2013; Butler & Skattebo, 2004; Coltrane et al., 2013; Rudman & Mescher, 2013; Vandello et al., 2013; Wayne & Cordiero, 2003)” (Williams et al., 2013, p. 212). Even if a heterosexual relationship is equitable in work before children, most couples adopt a “gendered division of labor [sic]” (Baxter et al., 2005; Cowan & Cowan 1992; Walzer 1998 in Rehel, 2013) where women take on the role of the unpaid caretaker and men take on the role of the financial provider (Rehel, 2013). Gender ideologies dictate “appropriate roles” for men and women (Aldous et al., 1998; McHale & Huston, 1984 in Bulanda, 2004) as workers, partners, and parents.

It is important to note that most of the research pertaining to the negative association of fatherhood and the ideal worker is outdated, predominantly ranging from 1989-2013 with more recent publications citing past studies to justify and inform their research. Thus, perceptions may be changing, but there is a lack of current research into the flexibility stigma, paternity leave-taking, and the perceptions and attitudes therein.

Contextualizing the UAE

Nearly all research pertaining to father-workers is Western-centric hailing from USA, Canada, UK, and the EU, especially Scandinavian countries. One notable exception focuses on Japanese culture (see Miyajima & Yamaguchi, 2017). In evaluating studies relevant to this proposed study, the researcher found two studies that loosely relate to PL in the UAE (Daleure & Al Shareef, 2015; Ibrahim & Al Marri, 2015); both studies were riddled with their own interpretation of gender stereotypes and specifically aimed toward Emirati employees rather than including expatriates, which make up 88.5% of the UAE’s population (United Arab Emirates Population Statistics, 2021). The expatriate population makes the UAE unique in that the majority of its workforce is private sector, expat employees. As such, most of the literature pertaining to government funding for Parental leave may not be relevant as in the UAE, it is up to private companies to cover financial costs of providing Parental leave. The UAE mandates the private sector to provide a fully paid Maternity leave of 45 calendar days, and a fully paid Parental leave, available to either the father or mother, of five days (Maternity leave - The Official Portal of the UAE Government, 2021), but they do not subsidise the cost. As such, companies tend to offer only what is required by law rather than potentially offering more substantial leave. “Resistance to workplace flexibility is not about money. It is about morality” (Williams, et al., 2013, p. 210).

There are several studies which indicate that the financial burden of providing ample Parental leave pays off down the road as employers who offer flexible leave consideration report higher retention and loyalty of employees, and that employees availing such leave tend to exhibit above average performance, but further investigation into whether it costs as

much as what is gained is needed. This financial benefit may not be as positive for smaller companies of fewer than 100 staff members, but for larger companies, the benefits overwhelmingly support the case for flexible work options and performance gains (Smeaton et al., 2014). Yet, the perception that men who take PL are less masculine and inferior employees prevails; as a result of this attitude, many men feel that they cannot take the PL to which they are legally entitled, let alone request a longer leave or flexible work options in order to achieve a better work-life-balance (WLB) and be an involved father (Bornstein, 2013; Brandth & Kvande, 2002; Hill et al., 2003 in Rudman & Mescher, 2013; Petts et al., 2020; Redmond et al., 2006; Williams et al., 2013).

Research indicates that if the cultural standards approve of WLB practices like taking PL, then male leaders who request such leave are viewed positively so long as they do not request any additional leave or flexibility (Gartzia et al., 2018). In the UAE, the Paternity entitlement used to be two fully paid days of leave, but it was recently updated to five days of Parental leave (Maternity leave - The Official Portal of the UAE Government, 2021); the father is not necessarily encouraged to take this leave as it is available either to the father or as additional leave to the mother.

So, what seems like promoting Paternal care is not necessarily the case, especially if upper management does not promote such WLB measures. Also relevant to mention is the fact that Free Zones in the UAE were not compelled to follow the Labour Ministry mandates for Parental leave until recently; the contracts of individual Free Zone companies superseded the mandates of the Labour Ministry, so some companies offered little to no Parental leave allowance until a welcome change in 2020 that states that all employees are entitled to five paid PL days, aside from those in the Dubai International Financial Centre (DIFC) and Abu Dhabi Global Market (ADGM), which have their own rules that now also include five paid days of PL (UAE issues paternity leave and equal pay amendments to Labour Law, 2020). Perhaps here it is relevant to note that this research focuses solely on heterosexual binary married couples as the UAE does not legally recognize non-binary relationships, and at the time that this research was conducted, did not allow unwed mothers to legally acquire a birth certificate for their new babies. The act of premarital sex was recently decriminalized (Barrington, 2021) and now unmarried women are able to acquire a birth certificate with some conditions (*Having a Child out of Wedlock in UAE*, 2022).

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) presents a unique context to study these dynamics due to its diverse workforce and evolving gender roles. Despite progress, cultural expectations continue to emphasize the traditional male breadwinner model. The need for research in this area is underscored by the limited existing literature on PL perceptions in the UAE.

Hypotheses

It is hypothesized that (a) the prevalent corporate culture within the UAE may discourage men from taking extended PL. Moreover, (b) the internal conflict between workplace obligations and the desire for paternal involvement might be prevalent among fathers.

Methods

Design

As the intended outcome of this research is to identify perceptions and attitudes of men regarding the uptake of PL in the UAE, qualitative research in the form of semi-structured interviews strode to elucidate the perceptions and attitudes of the population they represent. As there is an indication that there is little research representing attitudes and perceptions of Paternity Leave Uptake (PLU) in general, this research is pertinent as it represents essential information that has been otherwise overlooked. To the author's knowledge, this has been the first study focusing on perceptions of PLU in the UAE; as such, this research makes a valuable contribution as it provides insight into the myriad factors and influences that play into perceptions of PLU.

Participants

Purposive sampling (Black, 2010) was used to solicit 12 participants ($N = 12$) who were full-time-working males, and residents or citizens of the UAE; eligible participants also had to be fathers (at least one child five-years-old or younger) or expectant fathers at the time of their interview. The sample size was influenced by time constraints and the recommendation that 12 interviews is sufficient for the development of meaningful themes (Guest et al., 2006).

Table 1.

Participant Demographic Statistics

Criteria	Findings	Frequency	%
Number of children (at time of interview)	Expecting	2	17%
	1	5	42%
	2	2	17%
	3	1	8%
	3 & expecting	1	8%
	4	1	8%
Nationality	Western	6	50%
	UAE	2	17%
	Southeast Asian	2	17%
	African	1	8%
	Eastern European	1	8%
Occupational tier	Blue collar (service industry)	3	25%
	White collar	9	75%
Occupational type	Government	2	17%
	Service/hospitality	3	25%
	Business/Finance	6	50%
	Academia	1	8%

Participants were informed of the study and recruited by the first author via WhatsApp, Instagram, email, and word-of-mouth, which resulted in a diverse, yet eligible group. Of the 12 interviewees, ten had at least one child already and two were expectant fathers. All were full-time employed UAE residents, but only two were Emirati; five were American, and one each from India, Kenya, Russia, UK, and the Philippines. Of the 12 participants, two were government employees, three were blue-collar workers (server, receptionist, and administrative assistant), and the remaining seven were white-collar workers (business owners, and those working in finance, academia, and events coordination). Table 1 outlines demographic descriptive findings of the participants.

Materials

The researcher availed feedback from the Research Proposal as well as informal feedback from an expert in the field of quantitative psychology to determine best questions for the interview schedule [See Appendix A]. Interviews began with demographic questions pertaining to number of children and the type of occupation held by the participant. From there, the interview transitioned into discussing awareness of PL policies in the UAE or in the individual's company, and then a discussion ensued regarding best practices of PL, workplace culture and perceptions pertaining to PL.

Procedure

The researcher used a semi-structured one-to-one interview approach online via Teams at the convenience of the interviewee. Each interview was conducted by the first author and lasted 18-52 minutes ($M = 30$ mins, $SD = 9.35$). All interviews were recorded with consent. Transcriptions were created by MS Stream, and then proofread by the first author and deidentified to protect anonymity.

A semi-structured interview schedule, as mentioned above, was used with all interviewees with flexibility to alter the questions or order of questions during the interview if necessary. After the interview, all participants were debriefed and informed of next steps for the research process.

Data Analysis

Each interview was transcribed verbatim via MS Stream and was then subjected to qualitative content analysis using words and groups of words as analysis units. An inductive approach was used (Elo & Kynga, 2008) where themes were derived from interpreting data of the interviews as there is scant prior research on this topic. The coding strategy with extractions from the interviews is described in Table 2; thematic coding and analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2014) was performed by the primary researcher as time constraints did not allow for legitimate inter-rater coding. Although, no inter-rater coding was conducted, a discussion was held with an expert in the field (experienced psychologist in qualitative analysis) to check accuracy and wording of the themes and categories.

Ethics

Ethical approval was obtained from the Heriot Watt University Social Sciences Ethics Committee. All participants signed an informed consent for the interview and audio-recording, and were assigned a code to anonymize participants. During transcription phase, any identifiable information was deleted to anonymise the data.

Table 2.

Descriptive Results for Thematic Development Through Inductive Coding with Examples

Themes	Categories	Example from data
Non-supportive work culture	- Continuity of work - Sufficient leave	<i>If I were to say, you know, I need 10 days off or something, that definitely would not have been received well.</i> <i>Enjoy paternity leave, but these things need to be done, yeah?</i>
Unspoken stereotypes	- Perception of taking Paternity leave - Gender expectations	<i>But you know, it's kind of like the old school patriarchal view, like 'don't you want to get out of the house' type of thing.</i> <i>How much time have your coworkers or colleagues taken off; what's acceptable in your organization?</i>
Flexibility	- Best-practice Paternity leave	<i>Maybe, like, to be there on time when the baby is getting delivered and be next to your wife.</i> <i>I don't think that any of it should be forced... take maybe it's you know, 90 days of leave whenever it was needed.</i>
Disruption across society	- Impact of Pandemic	<i>I think COVID kind of shaped my views on parenting a bit more and allowed me to experience things that I wouldn't experience.</i> <i>I was very lucky, and this might be very unusual indeed, is that literally after my paternity leave had ended is when Dubai, when it locked down.</i>

Results

Four overriding themes were identified through analysing the data presented through the interviews (see Table 2, above): (1) Non-supportive work culture, (2) Unspoken stereotypes, (3) Flexibility, and (4) Disruption across society.

Non-supportive Work Culture

When first asked whether they felt supported in taking PL, nearly all participants said they felt encouraged (n = 10; 83%) with only two participants indicating that they felt otherwise. Interestingly, with blue-collar participants (n = 3; 25%), most suggested they were not

supported in taking PL (67%). Participant 9 said he felt supported in taking leave, but was not actually given paid PL; instead, he was given additional unpaid annual leave, which indicates a lack of support. Participant 7 said that he was denied any PL and that the company he worked for made such decisions based on “which grade or category” an individual was in. Because he was a lower-tier employee and not “in the good books,” he felt he was overlooked.

In contrast, most white-collar participants (n = 9; 75%) said they felt encouraged or supported to take leave but were met with a conflict of being expected or feeling obligated to work while on PL (n = 7; 58%), which indicates superficial support at best (see Table 3). As Participant 3 said, “Enjoy paternity leave, but these things need to be done.”

Notably, the UAE resident participants (n = 2; 17%) suggested that they felt completely supported and were not expected to work during leave. In fact, Participant 4 indicated that he was able to take extended leave due to complications with the birth of his child and felt that “from a work perspective, they were more than understanding.”

All blue-collar participant jobs are not conducive to work-from-home strategies, so they were not subject to this expectation if they received PL.

Table 3.

Participant Descriptive Findings

Criteria	Findings	Frequency	%
Paid/unpaid Paternity leave	Paid	7	58%
	Unpaid	1	8%
	Not given	3	25%
	Not applicable	1	8%
Annual/other leave used	Annual leave	4	33%
	Other	2	17%
	Not applicable	6	50%
Help at home (nanny/maid)	Yes	6	50%
	No	6	50%
Extended family help	Yes	7	58%
	No	5	42%
Working during Paternity leave	Yes	7	58%
	No	5	42%
Wife works	Yes	8	67%
	No	4	33%

Unspoken Stereotypes

Continuing with Participant 4, one can see a duality in the support hiding in the guise of unspoken gender expectations as, because he did take an extended leave after the initial three days of PL, he was asked “Did you give birth or your wife?” suggesting a gendered expectation for the role of a father versus the role of a mother. The notion that the wife

should be the primary caregiver to the child was expressed in every interview in some capacity or another ($n = 12$; 100%); the role of the father as the breadwinner was also noted, but interestingly, only half of the participants expressed the idea that a man should be the primary earner ($n = 6$; 50%).

Several participants mentioned being met with, to quote Participant 2, “the old-school, patriarchal view” of going to the office to escape being at home ($n = 9$; 75%) either from employers, colleagues, or family members.

“Let me note that down: too much time with family... it’s an interesting dichotomy of making sure you celebrate it in the public eye, but in reality you’re getting black marks for sure.” (Participant 2)

In most cases, the wives of the participants also worked ($n = 8$; 67%) indicating that the majority of these families were dual-income homes. Half of the participants suggested that their wife was the breadwinner or of equal status to the man’s occupational status ($n = 6$; 50%) indicating a duality between the unspoken gendered role expectations and reality.

In contrast, there were several participants who indicated that their wives no longer work ($n = 4$; 33%), including one incident ($n = 1$; 8%) in which the wife was terminated because of her pregnancy and therefore forced to move back to her native country leaving the father in the UAE, and one case ($n = 1$; 8%) in which the participant indicated that he would prefer his wife to be a stay-at-home parent.

Nearly all participants mentioned an inherent perceived value in spending time and bonding with their baby in the first few weeks ($n = 10$; 83%). Where most participants felt they have a vital role in supporting their wife, a few did suggest that they “worry about being useless” (Participant 11), indicating that they undervalue their role as a caretaker. A slight majority of participants expressed a perception that PL is a break or vacation, rather than the uptake of a new, important role at home ($n = 7$; 58%) either voiced by themselves or as an expression of what their superior communicated to them.

Flexibility

When asked about what a perfect PL scenario might be, most indicated the need for flexibility on some level ($n = 8$; 67%). Flexibility was described as the ability to take leave when and as needed to participate in parenting for a certain amount of time. For example, one father indicated that having 90 flexible days during the first two years of a child’s life would be best practice for PL (Participant 12). In fact, all white-collar participants, except for one who mentioned that his daily work schedule is quite forgiving, advocated for flexibility in PL. Interestingly, none of the blue-collar participants ($n = 3$; 25%) mentioned flexibility as an option.

In several instances, when participants mentioned the notion of flexibility for PL, they followed it up with an expression of how unlikely or difficult it would be to implement such a strategy; having said that, those participants who experienced new fatherhood during the

COVID lockdown suggested that the pandemic taught society that it is possible to promote and execute a flexible work-culture, and therefore a flexible PL culture as well: “You can see it during COVID...I like having the flexibility to be able to take off with family” (Participant 8).

When asked whether they felt the PL they received was sufficient, only one of the eligible participants ($N = 10$) said yes ($n = 1$; 10%); two participants were expectant fathers and as such, ineligible to answer this question. Ironically, when first asked how much PL they would like to have, most participants began with conservative requests and then upon further discussion the idea of long-term flexibility was brought up.

The perception of a changing culture with regards to parental roles was often mentioned in conjunction with the perfect-world scenario question [Question 9; See Appendix A] in which participants ($n = 9$; 75%) mentioned the belief systems of their own cultures or parents informing their personal perception as to what their role as a new dad might be. In most cases, participants indicated a desire to have flexible work options to fulfil the new involved father persona.

Disruption Across Society

The disruption that the global COVID-19 pandemic has caused is an exceptional phenomenon. Four participants ($n = 4$; 33%) had babies during the pandemic and as such found themselves in the unique position of experiencing fatherhood in a way they never anticipated, essentially forced into an extended flexible PL role. Where several fathers had likened PL to vacation or a break, or suggested through description of employer comments that the perception of PL is that it is a holiday ($n = 11$; 92%), the COVID-19 quarantine left these particular new fathers with the lasting impression that parenting a new baby is ongoing, exhaustive, yet rewarding hard work:

“I thought, like, pathetically, I’ll have a week off and be able to bond... I did not realize if I went back to work after just that week to leave my wife there to do all that work by herself, it’d be ridiculous, so big change came from the reality of seeing how much work a baby is.” (Participant 3)

Most of these fathers were suddenly in a government mandated lockdown, working from home and unexpectedly experiencing the role of a new involved father, whether they intended to or not. In all instances with fathers who were working from home, they expressed gratitude in being able to experience fatherhood in that way:

“I was very lucky... literally after my paternity leave had ended is when Dubai, when it locked down.” (Participant 3)

“I think COVID kind of shaped my views on parenting a bit more and allowed me to experience things that I wouldn’t experience.” (Participant 1)

Many fathers ($n = 7$; 58%), including those who were already fathers before COVID, expressed an appreciation for the flexibility that COVID forced them to have when they learned to work from home.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions and attitudes of men regarding the PL and PLU in the UAE. Additionally, it sought to highlight prevailing underlying stereotypes that effect PLU.

Pluralistic Ignorance

The researcher expected that most fathers would indicate the desire to take longer PL than the usual allotted three days that most UAE fathers were offered. The research indicated that where most fathers actually took fewer than three days off, they all expressed a desire for more time, which is interesting because the vast majority of participants shared the belief that they were valuable and needed at home as part of the parenting partnership, but a sense of obligation to the workplace, combined with only superficial support from management, along with the prevailing belief that the man should be the breadwinner seemed to override this popular opinion.

This outcome links to interview Question 9 (see Appendix A) in which the participants were asked if they have any friends who have taken PL and if so, how they found it. Several participants indicated that they do have friends who took leave, but they really did not discuss the matter with them. The researcher anticipated this question would generate valuable data through what was said, but paradoxically, found that the valuable data is actually in what was not said. In fact, the data here appears to be the fact that men do not seem to discuss the matter of PL with their peers or colleagues. As such, the concept of pluralistic ignorance that was mentioned in the literature review above can be identified as rampant in UAE work culture.

As research has indicated that the projected perception of workplace culture needs to be modelled by management, it can be presumed that the culture being demonstrated by upper management is non-supportive for Paternity leave-taking and that it continues to perpetuate the gendered stereotypes that the man should be the breadwinner while the woman should take care of the child(ren). Not only can this be presumed, but also it was demonstrated through data presented in several participant interviews.

Workplace Obligation

It had been assumed that most fathers would indicate some kind of conflict because of a sense of workplace obligation and this idea was supported. However, it is interesting to note that many of the participants who worked during PL expressed emotions of regret, guilt, or shame pertaining to having worked while they felt they should have been helping their wives and bonding with their baby instead:

“With the shame as well about doing that. Sometimes you go off and you don’t let your wife see that you’re actually doing a bit of work. ... your dirty little secret is that you’re doing work on the side.” (Participant 3)

“I was at the hospital for a significant percentage of the time, but also still trying to do a couple of these things, which I mean, really in retrospect... There was no reason for me to go to the conference. It wasn't like an urgent type of thing.” (Participant 8)

There are several reasons why the men may feel obligated to work when they are entitled to PL, including being led to believe that nobody else can do their job as there is no PL coverage, that it is better to deal with it sooner rather than later, and the general sense that if they choose not to work, then they will suffer consequences for those actions. Research backs up this fear as it has been demonstrated, above, that fathers who express too much desire to spend time with their families are often penalized and overlooked for promotions. In contrast, the mere act of becoming a father increases one’s status in the workplace. This status building can be seen very clearly through one of the Emirati participants who mentioned that once a man has a child, they are referred to as “Father of” to show that they are more revered because they are a parent.

Superficial support

The researcher also anticipated that the participants would indicate a discouraging attitude from their managers upon requesting PL. However, what was actually found was more insidious than presumed; the management would give the impression of support. Nearly all participants felt supported or encouraged to take their entitled PL, but the reality that they were still expected to work during that leave and/or be available to work upon request led to feelings of being undervalued as an employee and father, and general disappointment and shame for taking time away from supporting their wife and new baby.

For the researcher, this devious duality is the crux of the problem as it does undermine the value of the father-employee and also suggests that the mother-employee is less valuable as she is not expected to work when she is on Maternity leave. Having said that, in two cases, participants mentioned that their wives did not switch off completely and did some work during their Maternity leaves. The assumption that the woman needs time to recover physically and emotionally makes sense, but the man also experiences emotional turmoil during the introduction of a new baby. Both parents experience broken sleep patterns and the demand of changing home-life patterns to accommodate this new human. Men are not immune to sleep deprivation and new-parent anxiety, let alone the stress of worrying about one’s partner recovering after giving birth. Participant 10 mentioned:

“After five days, when I was in work, I was wondering if she's fine. I was worried; I was worried 'cause I don't know if she's fine or the baby is fine.”

Add to this the notion that men are also very capable caregivers and the importance that a father has adequate bonding time with their child to encourage healthy development, and the perception that superiors are not actually supportive of men taking PL becomes disheartening and disappointing. It just shows the underlying “old-school patriarchal” culture that continues to pervade workplace culture despite evidence that men would like to evolve beyond these gendered stereotypes to be more evolved and involved fathers:

“They were very surprised by how much I was involved ... whereas for me that felt weird because... it was 2020” (Participant 3).

To reiterate, now that it is 2021, perhaps workplace culture, and culture in general should be doing a better job at encouraging equity in the office and at home.

Limitations and Future Research

As the data was primarily coded by only the primary researcher, there is potential that the subjectivity could be skewed (Smith, 2015); however, the researcher did solicit feedback from an expert in the field to limit this potential issue. Also, given that the researcher conducted one-to-one interviews, there is a chance that the perception of the researcher may have affected participant responses (Hilgert et al., 2016) and that participants may have been less than honest as a means to fulfil social desirability (Crowne & Marlowe, 1964). Having said that, the researcher did take great efforts to reassure confidentiality and to develop rapport early on in the interviews to ensure comfortability and forthcoming responses. It is also important to note that because of the effects of the pandemic, all interviews were conducted online rather than in-person, which may have affected user responses. In some cases, poor connectivity had a slight effect on the fluidity of the interview as Wi-fi was sometimes unreliable, and in one instance the participant needed to find a charger for his device mid-way through the interview. It is not perceived that these issues had any lasting effect on the outcome of the interviews.

One point that became evident through analysing the data was that not all children were born in UAE and then not all children and wives continue to live in UAE, which is perhaps a unique condition of this country. In one instance, a participant’s wife lost her job due to pregnancy complications and was forced to return to her home country. In another instance, the wife never actually lived in the UAE. Perhaps future research on this topic should stipulate that the wife and child should reside in the UAE at the time of delivery as well. Having a wife and child outside of the UAE is still relevant as the participant was still eligible for PL, but it complicates leave as they would theoretically need more time and as babies are unpredictable, they may need to leave abruptly. Whether the cost of the flight to their home country is covered by the employer for PL is unclear. Generally, employers are responsible for covering one annual return flight to an employee’s home country.

Anecdotally, it became evident that all participants were residents of Dubai. The researcher would not expect this point to impact data, but perhaps seeking participants from other emirates would bring up different perceptions. A scope for future qualitative research

could be to group participants by emirate.

One more note is that during the time that the researcher was compiling and analysing data, the UAE introduced the new Parental leave policy that encourages five days of Parental leave, which became a discussion point in several interviews and may have impacted participant perceptions of PL.

Generalisability was difficult to achieve in this instance because of the diverse range of cultures, occupational tiers, and presumed incomes. Given the opportunity to further investigate this topic, it is advised to conduct more qualitative research on several purposely sampled interview groups to enable generalisability for those groups (by economic tier, for example). At first this lack of generalisability was intentional, but in evaluating the data, the researcher came to find the seemingly one-off responses to be indicative of the need for further investigation.

It is also advised that future qualitative research be conducted with superiors or line managers who are at the helm of presenting and modelling the workplace culture. Understanding the attitude and perceptions of the role-models would give invaluable insight into understanding the perceptions of PL and PLU by employees.

Another stimulating opportunity for research would be the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on changing the PL perceptions of men who became fathers during that time. Based on anecdotal evidence from the research conducted, it was demonstrated that most of the men who became fathers during the pandemic were able to experience new fatherhood in a way that they did not anticipate and as a result, they became aware of the unappreciated upsides, and of course challenges, of being a more involved part of the new parent experience.

And finally, one burning question that has developed through evaluating the data is: why is it presumed that women can endure and recover from a career break after having a child, but men cannot? It is recommended that further qualitative research on the topic of perceptions of PL and PLU in the UAE also investigates this topic.

Conclusions

This study has made a novel and valuable contribution to understanding perceptions and attitudes pertaining to PL and PLU in the UAE. It has investigated several aspects that have, to the author's knowledge, not yet been explored elsewhere; specifically, the ties of these perceptions to UAE work culture, and also the effects of the global pandemic on perceptions of PL and PLU.

The data overwhelmingly demonstrated the desire of fathers to be more involved and have more time to be a part of their new child's life, whilst also feeling compelled to return to work before they felt ready to do so because of an insidious superficial culture of non-support for Paternity roles. The data also suggested that the culture of pluralistic ignorance prevails and recommends that employers and male employees be more vocal and supportive of PL to drive positive change of this culture.

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Appendix A

Interview Schedule:

1. How many kids do you have? How old are they?
2. What kind of work do you do? (don't have to disclose company name) What is your role with the company?
3. What kind of hours do you work?
4. Does your partner work? Full-Time/Part-Time?
5. Do you have help at home? In what capacity? (cleaner, nanny, relative, etc.)
6. How much leave did you take when your child(ren) was (were) born?
7. To what extent were you encouraged/discouraged to take paternity leave by your employer/spouse/colleagues/friends and family?

8. How did you manage everything after your child was born?
9. Do you have any friends who have taken paternity leave? If so, how did they find it?
10. Are you aware of the paternity leave policy for the UAE and/or for your company? (Explain if needed.) What is your opinion of the sufficiency of the current paternity/parental leave policy?
11. What factors do you think might influence or play a role in how people perceive paternity/parental leave? How do you think cultural background might play a role in a person's perception of parental leave?
12. What would be the ideal scenario for paternity/parental leave policy?
13. What, if anything, might change your perspective or opinion on paternity leave-taking?
14. How has your perspective on paternity or parental leave changed since having a child/children?
15. Do you have any other thoughts about paternity leave-taking that you think we missed?