

**Educational Differences in Parents' Child Care Time in Cross-National Perspective:
The Contexts of Belgium, Denmark, Spain, and United Kingdom**

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Motivation and Research Questions

The study of parental care time is essential to understand the wellbeing of individuals and social groups from different generations. Parental care time critically affects child wellbeing, and is embedded in the general social relations of different demographic groups across the society (Bianchi, Milkie, & Robinson, 2006). Although all parents are expected to be highly motivated to actively engage in child-related activities (Hallberg & Klevmarken, 2003), parents' time with children differs substantially across demographic groups. For example, gender has been systematically found to be a key predictor of parents' child care time (Craig, 2006). Yet, other variables, both at the micro and macro level, are also important explanatory factors of how parents' child care time differs across groups.

Previous studies have paid particular attention to the role of education (and socioeconomic status) in affecting parental care involvement. The existing literature found, for a number of countries, that college-educated parents are more actively involved in different types of child care activities than lower educated parents (Bonke & Esping-Andersen, 2011; Guryan et al., 2008; Sayer et al., 2004). This education gradient was not only observed for developmental activities, such as reading to children or engaging in cultural/intellectual related activities (Bianchi et al., 2006), but also in more physical-related activities, like supervising children, putting children to bed, or feeding (Gracia, 2014). Some studies suggested that such educational differences might be driven by the fact that well-educated parents disproportionately adhere to highly-intensive practices that are consistent with contemporary child-oriented norms (Lareau, 2003). Other studies, however, argued that college-educated parents may also comparatively invest more time in child care due to their economic and time advantage associated to their privileged social position (Bianchi et al., 2006). Most of these theoretical perspectives focused at the micro-level, and so were not originally designed to study country differences.

How education affects child care time in different countries is particularly important to understand the way parental care operates at the micro and macro level. To date, however, this question has provided mixed and inconclusive findings. Sayer and colleagues (2004: 1156)

argued that “the less educated are more likely to be employed in occupations with rotating shifts, or inflexible hours, and may also have to work two jobs to make ends meet.” Thus, they hypothesized that educational variations in parents’ child care time are greater in countries where public institutions provide residual public support to equalize family-work balance across socioeconomic groups, as compared to countries with strong public universal family support. Against these expectations, education was found to have generally positive effects on mothers’ child care time allocation in countries with different family policies and welfare state regimes (Guryan et al., 2008; Sayer et al., 2004). By contrast, the effect of education on fathers’ child care time allocation was found to differ more substantially across countries, often in accordance to country-level differences in public policies (Hook & Wolfe, 2012; Sayer et al., 2004). These mixed findings motivate further research in this direction.

To date, however, scholars have not sufficiently analyzed the way education affects parental care time in different countries. Some variables, like income, family-work balance, or outsourcing domestic labor, might play a role in explaining the degree of comparative (dis)advantage of different groups in their child care across different countries. Scholars typically controlled for these types of factors. Now, previous studies have not specifically analyzed whether educational variations in child care are more or less driven by these variables. This suggests that new evidence addressing the possible mechanisms that might explain educational differences in child care time are needed, if we want to further understand the nature of educational inequalities in child care time across different countries.

In this study, we will analyze time-diary data from Belgium, Britain, Denmark, and Spain to investigate how education and paid work time affect mothers’ and fathers’ child care time in different national contexts. The contribution to the literature is twofold. First, we provide new evidence on educational differences in mothers’ and fathers’ child care time for countries that have not specifically compared by adopting our general research question. Second, we consider a number of control variables (i.e., income, paid work time pressures, outsourcing domestic help) that are expected to vary within and across countries. In so doing, our analyses can provide some new insights into whether or not, and under what conditions, education has different effects on parental care across distinct family-work and macro-level contexts.

The four European countries that we selected capture key differences in family-work contexts, and particularly in the role of how public institutions provide support to different socioeconomic groups. Denmark has active family policies in fostering high levels of family support to different socioeconomic groups (Esping-Andersen, 2009). At the other extreme, we find Spain and United Kingdom, where public institutions provide poor universal support to equalize monetary and time-related resources across families from different social groups, in the case of Spain associated to high levels of family solidarity, and in the United Kingdom to the market-oriented social relations (Lewis, 2009). In Belgium, public institutions provide lower levels of universal family support than in Denmark, but at the same time they offer clearly more extensive and universally accessible services than in Spain and United Kingdom (Jacobs & Gerson, 2005). Therefore, the four national contexts that we investigate provide allow us to study whether national contexts, and indirectly family-work public support, influence the level of educational inequalities in child care time allocation.

Data and Methods

We will use nationally representative time-diary data from the “2001 Danish Time Use Survey”, the “2005 Flemish Families and Care Survey”, the “2003 Spanish Time Use Survey”, and the “2000 British Time Use Survey” (N = 4,023). The surveys of Denmark, Spain, and the UK are included in the ‘Multinational Time Use Study’ database. Two adult respondents in a couple reported their daily time-use activities in diaries of 10 minutes spells and were interviewed on several household and individual variables. The survey for Belgium is comparable to the other three surveys, though it counts activities in 15 minutes spells. We will focus on married or cohabiting couples with children aged 0-15. Our main dependent variable will be child care time, and we will eventually explore differences in child care time, such as interactive and routine care. Our main independent variable will be college education. The main mediator (or control) variables will be these four measures: ‘income’, ‘paid work time’, ‘work schedules’, and ‘outsourcing domestic labor’.

We will run different Ordinary Least Squares’ (OLS) models. In the basic model we will include only education and background variables (i.e., age, number of children, pre-school child), and add subsequently the different variables of interest to try to understand the extent to which educational differences in child care time and across countries are explained by the different variables that are included as controls.

Preliminary results

Preliminary results (not shown) can be summarized as follows: (1) Mothers’ education has low effects in Denmark, medium in Belgium and United Kingdom, and high in Spain; (2) Fathers’ education has low effects in Belgium and United Kingdom, medium in Denmark, and high in Spain; (3) Spain is the country where educational differences in mothers’ child care seem to be more directly driven by general social inequalities in family access to resources and family-work balance; (4) Fathers’ educational differences are not substantially altered when adding control variables, with the exception of Spain, where the mother’s income appears to explain substantial educational variations in fathers’ child care.

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