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and DEI framework:
a Theoretical Analysis
of Positive Spillovers in the Workplace

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by
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Introduction

Equity goes beyond equality as it understands and seeks to address existing inequalities. Different social layers can benefit from this concept, and it intersects various spheres. A pivotal point is family dynamics and the workplace, where gender differences are evident. Women still face harsh conditions in the workplace, far from balancing the gender gap, living the emotional burden of stereotypes and discrimination. They also experience pay gaps alongside the burden of unpaid labour. In this context, a topic that has been gaining attention in both academia and policymaking is parental leave. What started as maternity leave is now getting recognized as a shared responsibility that involves both parents. In this analysis, the role of paternity leave emerges.

Paternity leave will be the topic of this paper. This topic has been understudied, while it is actually of extreme importance. Its importance persists in many layers, from the individual rights of the father, to the help this can provide to the mother, to the ultimate benefits it provides to the whole nuclear family. This research will thus focus on one aspect of this polyhedral reality, applying the theoretical framework of relational good to the concept of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), to answer the question: What are the spillover effects of the relational goods generated through paternity leave within the workplace, in the framework of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion?

This research aims to do this by first laying the conceptual background, discussing relational goods, the DEI framework, and five points of connections between the two. It will then provide an overview of parental leave situations in Europe and Italy. It will focus on the rights and duties of a father and how the relational goods fostered by the fatherhood relationships can impact the workplace. It will analyze aspects such as transferable skills, father's responsibilities, and teamwork, ultimately highlighting the benefits paternity leave can bring to society, to the firms, and to the family itself.

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Methodological note

This research adopts a conceptual and literature-based analytical approach. It does not collect primary empirical data, but rather synthesizes existing scholarship on relational goods, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), and paternity leave policies. The analysis combines sociological theory with policy review at the European and Italian levels, proposing a relational spillover mechanism linking family dynamics to workplace outcomes. The aim is not to establish empirical proof or prove causation, but to develop a coherent theoretical framework to guide future empirical investigation.

Conceptual background

Relational goods

Social studies has long been focusing on interpersonal relations, a core aspect of human life. A concept that has been gaining recognition in the discourse is relational goods. They are intangible outputs that are produced by a combination of inputs of both tangible and intangible nature, that result from interactions and are characterized by an affective nature (Proteau & Wolff, 2003). They are produced by personal interaction, as the results of bonds between people (Lopez et al., 2017).

Relational goods saw their theoretical foundations in the work of Martha Nussbaum, Pierpaolo Donati, Benedetto Gui, and Carole Uhlner (Bruni, 2011). Gui and Uhlner have an economic approach to the matter, while this study follows a more sociological path, which is why it will mostly draw from the work of Donati.

In his work, he distinguished between primary and secondary relational goods (Donati, 2019). Primary relational goods come from direct relationships such as a father-son or husband-wife relationship. While they are secondary when they are shared among a large number of people, for instance, in community service associations or in the workplace. Their labelling as “secondary” should not mistakenly lead to considering them as less important; they are defined as such merely because they do not come from direct relationships, but rather indirect relationships (Donati, 2019).

These relationships create a net and multiply. For instance, in the case of a family with three people, mother-father-son, the relationships are not three relationships, but nine, with primary, secondary, and tertiary connections (Donati, 2019).

In this context, the nature of relational goods emerges as extremely dynamic. They can rapidly grow, but they also require fostering and care.

DEI framework

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) can be understood as an organizational change framework, a combination of multifaceted concepts (Yanikoğlu, 2025). It spreads across disciplines and sectors, but research converges on some common core elements.

- Diversity: diversity recognizes the presence of differences across identities, for instance, with gender, disability, nationality or socioeconomic status. This recognition serves as a pivotal tool for acknowledging privileges among members of societies (Yanikoğlu, 2025).
- Equity: equity places itself as a step forward; it aims at ensuring equal opportunities regardless of background. It fosters fairness in access, resources, and outcomes, often targeting structural barriers (Wolbring & Nguyen, 2023)
- Inclusion: inclusion revolves around the degree of acceptance of all individuals and groups, prescribing that it should be comprehensive (Lartey et al., 2025). An inclusive environment shall be created so that people are able to present their most authentic version, feeling safe in it.

At the intersection between the relational goods frameworks and the DEI debate, there can be found five essential relational goods: trust, reciprocity, cooperation, relational recognition of difference, and belonging.

Trust

Trust is the first relational good that will be considered in regard to the DEI discourse. The definition of trust this analysis considers is as follows: “a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another” (Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt & Camerer, 1998).

The literature around the concept of trust and its consequences is vast, ranging from psychology, to sociology and philosophy (Downey et al., 2015). Donati (2019) considers trust a relational good, that is, both the result and caused by social capital. In simple terms, trust is fostered by relationships, while relationships are built on trust. Donati (2019) indeed compares this concept to the paradox of the egg and the chicken, a situation where it is formally impossible to find a starting point of this interdependence. Regardless of its origins and the complicated nature of it, trust represents a fundamental value, essential for any kind of social relationship.

Trust is relevant and useful in the workplace, where it has been proven to increase performance (Kanya & Johan, 2025). It is indeed important for a range of outcomes, such as the commitment to the job, but also the satisfaction that

comes with it (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002). Furthermore, this relational good intertwines with the DEI discourse. Diversity practices are essential to foster trust (Downey et al., 2015). The same can be said for inclusion, as it can make trust grow between colleagues and ultimately increase their dedication to the workplace.

Reciprocity and Cooperation

Reciprocity is understood as the practice of giving to someone what they need or desire, knowing they will do the same when needed (Donati, 2019). In the context of relational goods, it generates and re-generates the bond of relationships. Reciprocity represents a crucial tool for relationships, and as it implies a degree of interdependence, it is actually based on the previously analysed trust (Weaver, 2014).

Relationships that carry the social capital of trust are made by strong ties that facilitate the reciprocated exchange of resources, not only between members of the same network, but also among different networks (Weaver, 2014). This sense of reciprocity can thus transcend the border of a singular network and apply to different networks that are linked by broader identities. In this context, practices of diversity and inclusion can foster the creation of such bridges.

In the context of the DEI discourse, reciprocity has been found to be a driver for sustained DEI-growth (Bee, 2022). This research argues that the relationship is reciprocal: equity, diversity, and inclusion all foster an environment where the link between identities can emerge. Thus, DEI provides the conditions for reciprocity to exist, but it is also fuelled by it as reciprocity builds inclusion. It creates relationships built on trust but also aimed at the future, generating inclusion in the future path of present people.

Cooperation, similarly to reciprocity, is based on trust and mutual commitment. This research draws from the definition of Gulati et al. (2012) of cooperation as “Joint pursuit of agreed-on goal(s) in a manner corresponding to a shared understanding about contributions and payoffs.” It is grounded in trust, consent, and voluntary commitment, informed by the understanding that all parties will be actively involved (Lopes & Calapez, 2011). It requires fostering, and it is produced by an ongoing process, being thus considered a relational good (Donati & Solci, 2011). It is understood as interrelated with trust, another relational good that ultimately fosters cooperation. Other tools to foster cooperation are diversity and inclusive environments (Kanya & Johan, 2026). Inclusive leadership, which is granted in the understanding of diversity as a valuable and essential characteristic, leads to wider acceptance of the risks that cooperation requires.

Relational Recognition of Difference

With “relational recognition of difference,” this paper refers to the practice of acknowledging and respecting diverse identities, needs, and perspectives with relational engagement. The relational part of this process is essential as differences are indeed generated by contrast, contrast that can only occur with relational comparison (Trowsell et al., 2021). In the same way, similarities are perceived, and they are crucially intertwined with differences. Through this process, recognizing differences, identities are acknowledged. This is where the connection with relational goods lies: relational goods are “identity-dependent” (Bruni, 2011). Relational recognition of differences is essentially a tool to foster relational goods, but even a relational good itself, since it is generated by relations. This concept is essential for the DEI framework because the outcome of equity and inclusion practices depends on the daily recognition of differences (Rossi et al., 2022). Diversity can only exist if differences are recognized, and equity and inclusion need to be informed by this practice.

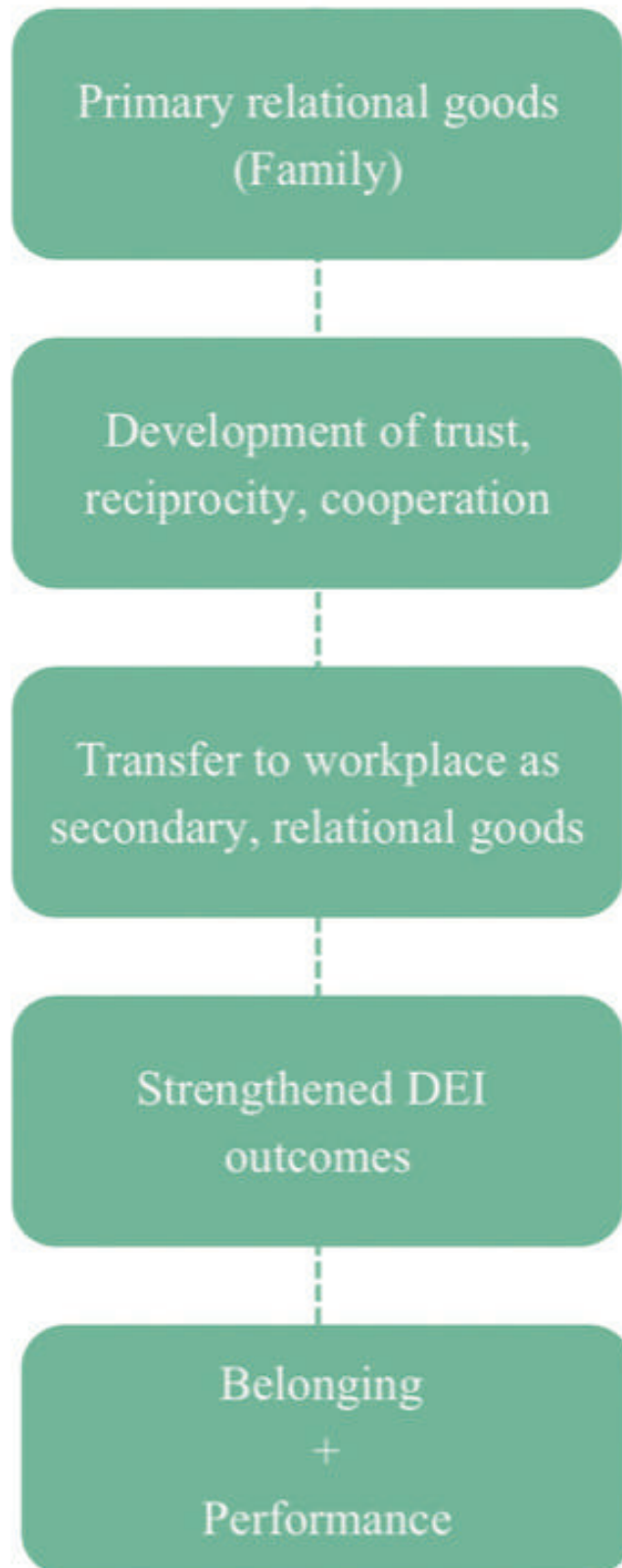
Belonging

Belonging is understood as the subjective feeling of being an integral part of one’s surroundings (Kelly-Ann Allen et al., 2021). The subjective nature of belonging makes it hard to conceptualize, especially when paired with its dynamic nature. Definitions tend to explicitly focus on social belonging, which is the concept this research project considers. This research understands belonging as the feeling of being accepted, included, and connected to a group that can vary, including, for instance, community, family, and the workplace, representing a link between the self and society (Kuurne & Vieno, 2022).

The dynamism of belonging is due to the fact that it is produced by evolving relationships. Belonging, a result of relationships, needs to be fostered to exist precisely because it is a relational good. One important instance where this relational good is important, and that will be further analysed in the discussion section of this paper, is family reciprocal belonging (Donati, 2016). The identity of parts of the family, a mother with a child, a father with a child, or a couple itself, is in a position of reciprocal belonging.

Considering the DEI framework, belonging appears to be an outcome of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Diversity is a fact; it exists independently. Equity is a choice, something that has to be actively promoted; inclusion is an action, and belonging is an outcome (Burkhard et al. 2022). It lies at the intersection of the three factors and could not exist without them; it is the positive outcome of the efforts informed by the DEI framework. Various contemporary works have started to consider the “DEIB,” where “B” stands for belonging, highlighting the intersection of them (Hogan et al. 2023).

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Paternal Leave: an Overview

The topic of this research project is paternal leave; for this purpose, the studies provide an overview of paternal leave policies first in Europe and then in Italy. However, in order to fully understand paternal leave, its predecessor has to be analysed: maternal leave.

Maternal leave and its role in equity and inclusion

A full analysis of paternal leave has to consider its predecessor in parental leave policies: maternal leave. Maternal leave has a longer tradition in the workplace, reflecting immediate biological needs since the mother physically bears the burden of the pregnancy in most traditional cases. This situation has been widely considered, and the need for protection for women in this significant part of their lives has been highlighted by the International Labour Organization's Maternity Protection Convention (ILO, 2014).

Maternal leave is fundamental for the health and well-being of both mother and child, both physically and mentally. For instance, it can help avoid postpartum complications, and the mental stress consequent of the pressure to return to work at the earliest convenience (WHO, 2020).

Although this practice is essential for both the mother and the child, long and exclusive maternal leave can actually reinforce gendered expectations of women as primary caregivers, actually damaging the pursuit of equity. Thus, the imbalances in parental leave can widen gender gaps and hiring rates (OECD, 2016). Lastly, maternal leave policies shall still consider the diverse needs of diverse families. This includes but is not restricted to adoptive mothers, LGBT+ parents, and non-traditional families. Thus, this leave has to operate within a broader system of inclusive caregiving rights.

This section will be of crucial importance as examining paternal leave together with maternal leave highlights the need for holistic and inclusive parental leave frameworks, since they appear essential to achieving long-term workplace equity and inclusion.

Paternal leave

Paternal leave is a topic that has been gaining attention, as it is understood as a pivotal moment in men's lives (Migliarese, 2024). As a consequence, paternal leave has increasingly been examined. The scholarship this paper focuses on tries to understand whether it can be a tool to reduce unequal gender norms in the workplace. In many of the studies, it has been highlighted that its role is to shift social norms, reduce gendered divisions of labor, and even support

what can be considered a more equitable outcome for both women and men (Earle et al., 2023).

Firstly, when incentives are made for paternity leave, more egalitarian attitudes towards women's roles both in the workplace and at home arise. Shifts in gender norms have also been found (Ferré et al., 2023). Looking at its impact in the household, this breaks the stigma around the unpaid labour of mothers, balancing the burden of childcare between the two parents. This can even reduce workplace discrimination and challenge the so-called "motherhood penalty" (Petts & Knoester, 2019).

Looking at the global trends, although paternity leave around the world has increased exponentially, most countries still reserve far less time for fathers compared to mothers. Moreover, it is crucial to underline that paternity leave alone is not sufficient, as complementary policies that work on aspects such as affordable childcare or workplace flexibility are parallel drivers of gender equality.

All of these aspects surrounding the topic have been analysed by national institutions, academics, and international organizations, such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The latter just published, on the 17th of October 2025, a report on policy trends (OECD, 2025). In one of the sections, the benefits that fathers' leave can produce in their family is analysed, with an emphasis on the promotion of gender equality at work. An addition to the other studies is the focus on peer-encouraging mechanisms that can occur when male-coworkers take parental leave, which influences the perception of it and ultimately normalises it.

European policies on paternity leave

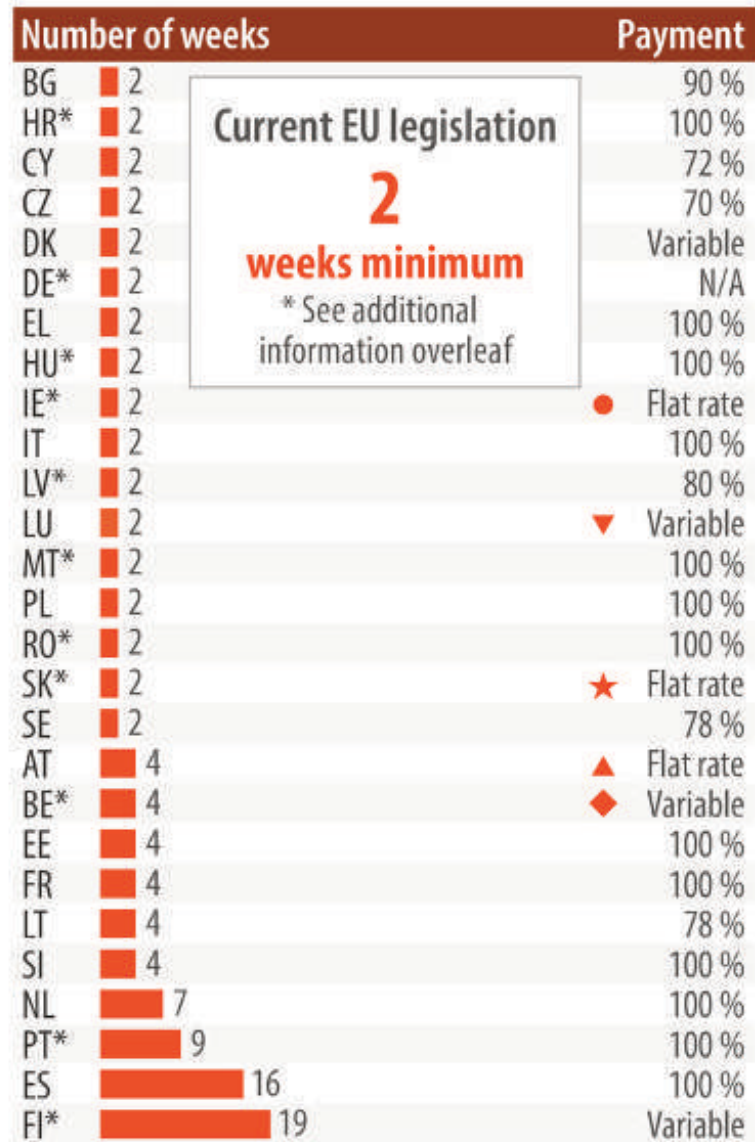
The European Union has been actively working to promote gender equality and inclusion; however, it was only in 2019 when major efforts were put into the topic of paternity leave. With the Directive (EU) 2019/1158 on Work-Life Balance for Parents and Careers, the right to paternity leave was created at the EU-level. This was done, giving three years to member states to transpose most measures, thus setting a deadline of the 2nd of August 2022.

The basic requirement of this directive is that fathers have the right to at least 10 working days of paternity leave to be requested around the time of the birth, and this must be paid at least at the level of national sick pay. Moreover, the Directive mandates a minimum of 4 months parental leave per parent, highlighting that at least 2 months must be non-transferable, which encourages the participation of fathers in it.

The consequences of this directive were remarkable, since most Member States transposed the Directive into national law by the deadline, and for some of them it meant to create or expand such rights. This ultimately encouraged fathers' participation in childcare, taking a part of the burden away from mo-

thers. However, the compensation level plays a crucial role in this choice, and unfortunately, although the directive sets minimum standards, it does not harmonize pay levels.

Paternity leave



Sources: National legislation (e.g. MISSOC), websites of national institutions, European Commission website, and other reports.

EPRS | European Parliamentary Research Service

Italian policies on paternity leave

It is crucial to understand the EU Directive 2019/1158 as it increased paternity leave conditions in Italy. Previous to it, Italy had 5 days of compulsory paternity leave. It translated into the Legislative Decree No. 105/2022, where a right for the working father to 10 days of paternity leave was introduced. This can be extended to 20 days in case of multiple births and can be requested from two months before the birth or adoption of the child to five months after it. It is not divisible into hours, and the allowance is 100% of the father's salary, which is anticipated by the employer but then reimbursed by social security.

Although Italy remains within the countries with the shortest paternity leave in Europe, this Legislative Decree had positive consequences as for instance, it extended some of the leave age-limits and even allowed some cases of self-employed parents use of parental leave.

The response from the public has been positive as recent data show that about 73% of Italian fathers report using paternity leave. However, critiques about its length arise as well, as 91% of mothers and 89% of fathers find this duration inadequate. Moreover, the traditional gender roles represent an obstacle to it as well (Zambri et al., 2024).

Thus, although paternity leave in Italy represents an important driver for active fatherhood and gender equality, its effectiveness remains limited, both by cultural and regional barriers, and also organizational.

Equity and inclusion

Expanding the focus beyond mere gender equality, paternity leave is also a pivotal actor in advancing broader workplace equity and inclusion. In this context, this paper understands the concept of equity as defined by Merriam-Webster as: "justice according to natural law or right specifically: freedom from bias or favoritism" (2019). Thus, the discussion will evoke this primary, justice-oriented definition.

Looking at paternity leave, this falls under the umbrella of equitable caregiving practices and, as such, has been highlighted to reduce discriminatory practices and further support a diverse and inclusive workplace. There are two main areas where this kind of leave has proven to be extremely effective in promoting equity: reducing the assumption of women as the "default" caregivers and including diverse families.

Firstly, paternity leave plays a pivotal role in advancing equity in the workplace by reducing the assumption that women are the "default" caregivers (André, 2025). Having policies that allow men to take the time to dedicate to child care, legitimize, and promote such shared parental responsibilities. This fosters enquiries as it promotes fairer hiring and promotion practices, as perceptions of women as the only caregiver decline, breaking the stereotype of them encountering prolonged career interruptions. Thus, having men accessing pa-

rental leave as well decreases the bias of women as the main carer of the burden (Tavis et al., 2024).

Secondly, equity-oriented frameworks expand beyond traditional notions of family and fatherhood, recognising the existence of diverse nuclear groups. For instance, paternity leave can affect diverse families, such as adoptive parents, same-sex couples, and more broadly, non-traditional family units. Thus, providing this possibility aligns better with the various and widely different parental possibilities, ultimately promoting equity, diversity, and inclusion (World Bank, 2023).

Discussion

The debate on diversity, equity, and inclusion has generated an enriching mechanism. This paper will focus on the equity and inclusion aspect, specifically looking at the role of relational goods generated by paternity, in it.

What the debate is often missing is the idea that there is a stratification of identity. Considering the workplace, a father is not merely a man, but his position has multiple layers. In this context, fathers have both rights and duties that shall be considered by firms when planning their paternity leave strategy.

Relational goods are a byproduct of interpersonal relationships and thus cannot be generated if the relationships are not fostered. In the cause of fatherhood, there are both primary and secondary relational goods to consider. The first concerns the father-son and father-partner relationship, and it is important to consider that a father has both rights and duties. A father should have the possibility to spend time with his family, to foster relationships that are crucial in his life. Which is why this paper argues for a raise of attention to policies concerning paternity leave. However, the discussion is broader than this.

A father indeed has duties, duties to raise such a child, to co-parent, and share responsibilities. It is only by fulfilling these duties that essential skills can be learnt. Patience grows, attention and understanding, and time management. These skills become transferable and can be extremely useful in the workplace. The workplace is also a space where secondary relational goods appear.

A sense of solidarity between fathers, and more broadly parents, is created. The worker is not just a man anymore, but has a new layer, a layer of responsibilities and skills. It also shapes a sense of social responsibility that remains long-term. All of this can have a positive impact in the workplace, where teamwork can be improved, as well as communication, and management of responsibilities.

Paternity leave thus positions itself as a crucial instrument that firms can provide to their workers, who will then return with skills and social responsibility that are tied to their experience as fathers. The impact of providing paternity leave touches multiple layers. On a personal level, the father is able to obtain relational goods from the relationships with his partner and his child. On the other side, his child and partner also access primary relational goods from the fostering of their interactions. Secondly, in the workplace, secondary relational goods appear as he interacts with the community. Specifically important are his interactions with other parents, which will then be informed by his own experience as a father. The same can be said on a broader level, with a growing social responsibility.

This translates to the workplace, with efficiency, but also impacts equity and inclusion. It leads to the normalization of parenthood as a part of life that can

not only be combined with work life, but also provides tools to positively influence career outcomes.

Trust, reciprocity, cooperation, relational recognition of difference, belonging

Considering the five relational goods previously analysed, this research argues that paternity leave fosters trust, reciprocity, cooperation, relational recognition of difference, and belonging.

Paternity leave plays an essential role in fostering trust by representing a practice of diversity and inclusion. Firstly, paternity leave shows that men have the right to dedicate their time to their family, thus creating an inclusive environment where men are legitimized to be parents. Parenthood itself gets reshaped, becoming a common characteristic, and not a burden on women alone. It fosters diversity as it allows the option of being a father, but also considers families that are different from the hetero-genitorial nucleus. These two points are both tied to the previous analysis, which has explained how this kind of practice can foster trust.

This trust that is born in the workplace ultimately leads to practices of efficiency and dedication. Trust is also essential to fuel reciprocity, which is the second relational good taken into account. This research argues that paternity leave is essential to establish reciprocity in the workplace. The idea of giving to someone what they need or desire, knowing that the other will do the same when need reflects the concept of paternity leave. Colleagues understand that the co-worker needs that time off to fulfill his obligation towards his family, but also enjoy his rights of being present for them, and they realize they may need that same time in the future. Reciprocity also appears as fathers can help each other with everyday suggestions, exchanging anecdotes, and transferring what they have learned during their time off.

Parenthood also requires cooperation, and paternity leave provides the time and space to develop this relational good. Cooperation is beneficial both in the family and in the workplace. Father cooperation is a duty that they have towards the other parent, and it has been found to reduce stress levels for mothers (d'Orsi et al., 2023). Conversely, cooperation leads to higher performance in the workplace (Kanya & Johan, 2025). This paper thus argues that paternity leave is a crucial tool both for the wellness of the family and the worker's right to it, and for the firm itself. Since cooperation is a relational good, it is fostered by relationships, and during paternity leave, fathers have the time and space to foster it. When they come back to the workplace, they'll have deepened this skill. The firm, using goal-oriented practices that are grounded in cooperation, will be able to be more successful (Lopes & Calapez, 2011).

As previously understood, belonging is subjective, which means that it can also change over time. One point researched has focused on parenthood and belonging. This pivotal moment can lead to the development of a stronger

sense of belonging, especially when engaging with new activities and locations that are community-builders, such as bringing children to the playground or interacting with other parents (May, 2011). Paternity leave gives the opportunity to live this, to foster the sense of belonging through specific activities that only paternity can lead to. Moreover, paternity leave, as argued by this paper, fosters the introduction of paternity as part of the “accepted norms”, accepted norms that are crucial to feel this sense of belonging (Kuurne & Vieno, 2022).

Growing research has focused on the importance of implementing diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging in the workplace (Deborah et al., 2023). A link between belonging and high performance has been analysed, ultimately arguing for a resulting efficiency (Napitupulu et al., 2020; Elvie Maria et al., 2024). This paper follows this scholarship, arguing that belonging is an essential relational good for workplace efficiency. Paternity leave gives the possibility of fostering it, of creating ties that would otherwise not be possible. Thus, this practice is essential to foster efficiency.

Workplaces whose practices have fostered a diverse environment have been argued to be more successful; however, it actually depends on how the practices are done. Diversity needs to be fostered properly, and to do so, it has to be understood. Relational recognition of differences is essential in this, as it can inform the right policies (Feitosa et al., 2022). This paper, guided by the previous analysis, understands paternity leave as a practice that fundamentally understands the differences between motherhood and fatherhood. Many of these differences are based on social constructs that feminist perspectives would most likely demolish; however, no matter their roots, they are present. Paternity leave works towards a vision of shared responsibility, a vision that is informed by relational recognition of differences.

Moreover, this research argues that paternity leave, as a tool to re-demension norms, and allow fathers to address their duties and rights as parents and potentially as partners, could foster relational recognition of differences in the workplace. This could inform well-structured, diverse practices that will lead to more successful firms.

Foto di Alex Bodini su Unsplash



Conclusion

This paper asked what spillover effects relational goods generated through paternity leave produce within the workplace, in the framework of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. It argued that paternity leave generates primary relational goods in the family, which develop dispositions (trust, reciprocity, cooperation, belonging, relation recognition differences). These spill over into the workplace as secondary relational goods, strengthening DEI outcomes.

Theoretical Contributions and Policy Implications

The provided three main theoretical contributions: it reframed paternity leave as a relational mechanism, it connected relational goods theory to DEI, and introduced the hypothesis of "relational spillover" in the workplace. These theoretical contributions have policy implications. Paternity leave should not be seen only as welfare or gender policy, but rather as a relational investment. It can bring advantages both to firms, raising efficiency through transferable skills, to the family, providing time and space for primary relational goods, and to society more broadly, compensating gender inequality through cultural normalization.

Limitations and Future Research

This research is primarily conceptual and theoretical in nature. While it does not include original data collection, it does draw upon existing empirical studies on paternity leave and DEI outcomes. It argued for a mechanism through which relational goods generated in the family sphere can transfer into the workplace; this remains a hypothesis that requires further empirical validation. Furthermore, cultural norms and socioeconomic factors may significantly mediate the effectiveness of paternity leave policies, and the research presented here focused only on the European context, and Italy specifically. Lastly, while this paper acknowledges diverse family forms, it does not fully enter into discussions regarding class, race, and other intersectional aspects that may shape access to and experience of paternity leave. Future research should empirically test the hypothesis of the relational spillover proposed by this paper. This could be done by conducting qualitative interviews, longitudinal studies of fathers, and cross-country comparisons. Nevertheless, the broader intersectional approach could represent an interesting point of analysis.

Foto di Ana Curcan su Unsplash



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