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“You have to focus all your energy on being a parent”: Barriers and opportunities for Swedish farmers to be involved fathers

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ABSTRACT

Swedish farming fathers are facing new expectations about their level of involvement in their children's upbringing – expectations of their own, but also arising from gender equality policy and shifting societal norms. A gender-neutral parental leave scheme has been in place in Sweden since 1974 and gives parents a generous opportunity to take paid time off work to stay at home with their children. Generally, however, fathers tend to take only a small share of the days allotted for parental leave, with farming farmers among those making least use of this opportunity. In this paper we explore farmers' expectations of fatherhood and how different types of farm management can be combined with parenting. The paper draws on qualitative interviews conducted with three generations of farmers. Our results indicate that the notion of involved fatherhood, i.e. being emotionally present and nurturing, is identified by farmers as a societal norm laid on farming fathers today, and that farmers indeed want to pursue involved fatherhood. We conclude that farm operators face several barriers to fulfilling the ideal of involved fatherhood, especially related to the difficulties of being able to afford and find a competent replacement during long periods of parental leave. However, two types of farms stand out as offering opportunities to overcome these issues: farms run as corporations where the farm operator is employed, and small farms with a high degree of flexibility in how time is spent during the day or over the year.

1. Introduction

“On average, male farmers take 41 days of parental leave compared to a national average of 69 days”, according to an article in the Swedish agriculture trade magazine *Land* published on April 4, 2019. As Sweden allots 480 days of parental leave per child, this statement implies that a great majority of those days have instead been used by their partners and thus that male farmers take less than 10 per cent of the parental leave. Although Sweden can arguably be seen as one of the countries in which gender equality and involved fatherhood norms have developed furthest in the world, this quotation signals that Sweden, and particularly its farming sector, is still far from gender equal, and that mothers and fathers face unequal expectations about their roles as parents.

However, the above-mentioned trade magazine article about farming fathers taking far less than their share of paternity leave continues with a discussion that this is a problem that the farming sector should take seriously and argues that something needs to be done to increase the possibilities for farming fathers to take parental leave. Another recent trade magazine article portrays a positive example of a

farming father who has shared parental leave equally with his wife, noting that “parental leave has given me a closer relationship with my children” (*Lantmannen*, issue 5, 2019). The fact that these issues are raised and problematised, and positive examples highlighted, indicates that farming fathers in Sweden are facing new expectations (and have increased their own expectations) about how involved they should be in their children's upbringing, especially in relation to parental leave.

A concept often used by masculinity and fatherhood scholars to describe a wider societal change towards fathers being expected to be emotionally present and nurturing is ‘involved fatherhood’ (see e.g. [Farstad and Stefansen 2015](#)). Involved fatherhood illustrates a shift in norms that has been shown to be beneficial not only for children but for fathers, mothers and society at large (see e.g. [Behson et al., 2018](#); [Ladge et al., 2015](#) for a study on benefits for employers). In Sweden, discussions on involved fatherhood take place within a specific frame of national politics on gender equality that has developed since Sweden first declared a gender equality policy in 1960 – the first country in the world to do so ([Plantin 2015:91](#)). Sweden has one of the highest shares of women being active in the labour market in the EU at around 80 per cent

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(Statistics Sweden 2018:53, European Commission 2016:2). This is typically explained as an outcome of generous welfare schemes, which in addition to the parental leave scheme include access to heavily subsidised daycare for small children, after-school care and care during school holidays for schoolchildren, providing an opportunity for both parents to work full time. A gender-neutral parental leave scheme was first introduced in 1974, replacing an older system of maternity payments. Since 1974, the parental leave scheme has expanded through a series of reforms from 180 to 480 days of paid parental leave per child (Statistics Sweden 2018; Wahlström Henriksson 2016:33).

However, since its introduction, fathers have only taken a small share of the days allotted. During its first year in 1974, less than 0.5 per cent of the allotted days were taken by fathers, which by 1995 had risen to 10 per cent (Statistics Sweden 2018:46). To encourage fathers to take a more active role in childcare and increase gender equality, the Swedish government reformed the parental leave scheme so that each parent is allotted a minimum number of days that cannot be transferred to their partner. In 1995 this was set at 30 days, in 2002 expanded to 60 days and in 2016 to 90 days. The share of days used by fathers has also increased, from 10 per cent in 1995, to 20 per cent in 2005 and finally to 28 per cent in 2017 (*ibid.*). In 2018, an appointed government committee proposed expanding the set amount of days per parent to 150 days, but the government has yet to decide on this. In common parlance, the days designated to each parent are referred to as “daddy months” since these measures are taken to encourage fathers to use the parental leave scheme. The rationale behind encouraging men to use the parental leave scheme is to fulfil gender equality policy goals through at least two mechanisms: strengthening women’s participation in the labour market and strengthening men’s roles as more involved parents (see e.g. Duvander and Johansson 2012; 2019 for a discussion on the correlation between parental leave and gender equality).

In a farming context, recent research on farming fathers has shown that younger farmers share childcare responsibilities with their wives to a greater extent than older generations did. Meanwhile, younger farmers’ notion of good fathering practices is different from that of their own fathers’ generation, for whom fathering was often focused on socialising children to farm work (Brandth 2019). The changing attitude to fathering has happened in a wider context of structural change in the Swedish farm sector.

Since the 1940s Swedish agriculture policies have focused on farm restructuring, with a rhetoric signalling “the bigger the better” – the underlying assumption being that farms will become more efficient through economies of scale. These policies have however been based on the explicit assumption that family farms will, and should, dominate as the most common way of organising production (Flygare and Isacson 2003). There is no official definition of family farms in national statistics, but at national level 90 per cent of the agricultural land in Sweden is owned by private individuals (Statistics Sweden, 2013) and only 12 per cent of permanent jobs in agriculture are occupied by people with no family relationship to the farm owner (Statistics Sweden, 2014:139). However, the mechanisation and specialisation of farms that took place during the 1950s and 1960s resulted in farm women opting out of farming during the 1970s and 1980s, resulting in a farm structure increasingly dominated by male single operators by the 1990s (Djurfeldt and Waldenström 1996).

Between 1940 and 1990, Swedish farmers were protected from international competition through import tariffs and export subsidies. Domestic produce prices were negotiated between the state and the Federation of Swedish Farmers. In 1990 the Swedish government took the radical decision to deregulate agriculture, which meant the end of market intervention and subsidies. However, on the very day on which the deregulation policy came into effect, July 1, 1991, Sweden also submitted an application for European Union (EU) membership, which caused some of the intended steps towards deregulation to be suspended while the country awaited a decision on its EU entry. Following a positive response from the public in a general referendum in 1994, Sweden

joined the EU in 1995. For Swedish farmers, entering the EU had a similar effect as deregulation would have had, as it opened the way for competition on the internal market of the EU, which through trade agreements is in effect open to the global market (Eriksson 2020).

This paper draws on interviews conducted as part of a larger project on the transformation of farming in Sweden since the early 1990s. That project covered four main research themes: farm management strategies, livelihood strategies, how households view uncertainty and risk in the future, and how gender is negotiated on farms. The setting of this study within a broader research project provides an opportunity to link data on farmer’s perceptions of fatherhood with their perceptions about and accounts of these other themes. The topic of this paper on the changing ideals of fatherhood was not initially part of the research design or interview guide. It emerged as an important issue that the interviewees themselves raised when asked questions about their expectations regarding farm succession, whether or not children are involved in farm work and thus are being socialised to farming, and what they considered the large societal changes and shifting values to have been since the early 1990s. This led to an expansion of the questions regarding parental leave and the inclusion of parenting practices in the interview guide.

In this paper, we explore how male farmers in Sweden balance their (potential) desire to be involved fathers with managing a farm. We begin by investigating the ways in which father’s attitudes towards parenting have changed over the generations, and how combining farming with involved fatherhood is enabled or hindered by different farm management strategies. This allows us to illustrate how farmers’ fathering practices are played out on farms with different farm management strategies, and to discuss the implications of this for the future development of farming, as well as the possibilities for farming fathers to become more involved parents.

2. Literature review and theory

2.1. Involved fatherhood

There is an extensive body of literature on fatherhood, especially since the 1990s, dealing with issues such as changing norms and values about what makes a good father, how these norms play out in lived experience, and how fatherhood needs to be redefined following a wider acceptance of family constructions such as homosexual marriage (Marsiglio et al., 2000). Scholarly work on involved fatherhood includes studies exploring the difficulties men encounter in living by these norms in everyday situations in different national settings (e.g. Machin (2015) on the UK, Stevens (2015) on Australia, Bach (2019) on Denmark, Miguel, Gandasegui and Gorfinkiel (2019) for a comparison between Spain and Norway, Ralph (2016) on Ireland). Other studies delve into how fathers living by these norms make it work (e.g. Jentsch and Schier 2019; Locke and Yarwood 2017), and how positive experiences of involved fatherhood can spread through labour migration (Telve 2018). Others raise issues such as whether the ideal of involved fathers results in new gender conflicts (e.g. Lengersdorf and Meuser 2016) or question whether ideals of involved fatherhood are available only to middle-class families with stable employment and in a good position to negotiate their employment terms (Hrzenjak 2017). Recent studies also question the binary between involved and non-involved fathers. As discussed by Wahlström Henriksson (2020), older generations are sometimes stereotyped as non-involved, while younger generation’s involved fathers are sometimes assumed to be driven by gender equality ideals while in fact they might not be.

Due to the Swedish government’s emphasis on encouraging fathers to take more of the parental leave, there has been considerable research on fatherhood in Sweden in the last few decades (see Plantin 2015:92ff for an overview). In fact, more gender studies research is carried out on fathers than on mothers in Scandinavia (Wahlström Henriksson 2016:31). The involved fatherhood ideal has been argued to be a

hegemonic norm in Sweden, and has been so since at least the late 1990s (see e.g. Hagström 1999). Considerable research has focused on the difficulties that men who aspire to involved fatherhood ideals experience in turning their ideals of being an emotionally present and caring father into practice in everyday life. Wall and Arnold (2007) found that in a Canadian newspaper series dedicated to family issues, mothers continued to be positioned as primary parents, while fathers, despite nurturing an ideal of being involved fathers, were still seen as secondary parents whose relationships with children remained less important than mothers'. In Sweden, Lucas Forsberg's study found that while the discourse on involved fatherhood is hegemonic among Swedish men, fathers often fail to practise their ideals in real-life situations, or contest them when they are to be put into practice (Forsberg 2007). Another example is Sofia Björk's study on how fathers' reasoning when choosing between working part-time to devote more time to parenting or not is shaped by a need to justify their choice from an involved fatherhood ideal perspective (Björk 2013).

Parental leave schemes have been pointed out as problematic for those who do not fit into norms of employed work – including those who run their own businesses. Anxo and Ericson (2015) has shown that in Sweden, self-employed men on average use 27 days less in parental leave compared to fathers in general. The authors found two factors that explained this pattern – first, that self-employed men have relatively higher costs of absence, second, that it is more common for fathers in this group to use zero days of parental leave than for fathers in general.

2.2. Farming fathers

In the last couple of decades, a large and growing body of literature has emerged on rural masculinities (see e.g. Pini and Conway 2017; Brandth 1995; Little 2002; Woodward 2000; Campbell and Bell 2000), some of which discuss how farming masculinities affect farmers' decision-making (see e.g. Cush and Macken-Walsh (2018)). However, as Brandth and Overrein (2013) point out, little research has been done on fatherhood within agriculture. In their own paper, they show that farmers are adjusting to societal changes in terms of what a good childhood and good parenthood are perceived to be by adopting more involved parenting standards. This means that parents today are expected to devote more time to their children and engage with the children's activities and interests than was the case a couple of decades ago. In the context of farming, Brandth & Overrein show how fathering is carried out to a greater degree in the farm's 'domestic space', meaning in the house or doing activities that are separate from work, while older generations brought children more into the 'adult spaces', i.e. took children with them while they worked on the farm.

In a series of case studies in Norway, Berit Brandth has studied farming fathers' views on fatherhood and fathering practices for over twenty years (Brandth 2016, 2017, 2019; Brandth and Kvande 1998). Her work demonstrates that what distinguishes farming as work and farming fathers as parents from other lines of work or fathers is the co-location of work and home, which is typical for (family) farming. This co-location provides opportunities for men to be more active parents (Brandth 2017). However, in a study of fathering practices among farming families in Iowa by Peter et al. (2005), farming fathers often found this co-location of work and home to be challenging in terms of spending more time with children, as there is always a lot of farm work that requires attention. They conclude: "We found that while the flexible schedule and opportunities to interact with children are often touted by the farm father as ideal, the reality may be different. Home is sweet but can also be endless acres of planting and hogs pens full of work" (Peter et al., 2005:247).

Brandth also points to how patriarchal gendered identities have historically meant that women have been in charge of a designated 'indoor' domain and men in charge of an 'outdoor' domain on family farms (Brandth 2017:344). However, childcare has always been carried out in both domains. In a study on two generations of farming fathers'

attitudes to childcare, Brandth (2019) shows that the older generation's fathering practices were focused on socialising their children to take over the farm by teaching them and letting them help with farm work. The younger generation, however, tend to socialise their children to farming to a lesser degree since their fathering practices are based on the belief that children should be allowed to explore their own interests and ambitions in life, rather than being socialised to follow in their parents' footsteps, in this case going into farming. This means that farming fathers are slowly expanding their parenthood to share childcare duties undertaken in the domestic space or indoor domain, in addition to or instead of childcare in the farm workspace, the outdoor domain – which Brandth considers a sign of the establishment of more gender-equal co-parenting (Brandth 2019).

3. Research methods

As mentioned in the introduction, this research is part of a larger project in which forty qualitative research interviews were conducted with farmers in 2017–2018.¹ Their farms are located in six municipalities in three different parts of the country: Skurup and Trelleborg in the vast and fertile plains of southern Sweden, Skara and Skövde in the mixed landscapes of plains and grazing areas of central Sweden, and Kramfors and Sollefteå in mainly forested areas with patches of farmland and grazing land in northern Sweden. The sampling criteria reflected our aim of achieving a broad range of examples of how farmers tackle issues within the four study themes of the larger project. We strived for representation of different production types, farm sizes, male and female farm owners, and age groups in the sampling.

The interviews took place on the farms, generally lasted between one and two hours and were semi-structured, during which an interview guide was used to ensure certain topics were covered. However, the interviews were more of a conversation in which the interviewees often initiated topics and described decisions and events that they felt were important. In some cases, the interviewees produced pictures or maps of the farms and took us around the farm afterwards, showing us their barns, animals and equipment. All the interviews were recorded with the interviewees' consent and notes were taken. To protect our informants' identities, we use pseudonyms and have taken care when revealing potentially sensitive information about events or other issues that could reveal their identities.

In our research team comprising four researchers, we conducted some interviews in pairs and some alone. When arranging the interviews, we asked for an interview with the farm manager, but in several cases the farm manager also brought his or her partner to the interview. In those cases, a pseudonym of the partner is included with the farm manager on the list of informants. We shared the transcripts and notes from all the interviews within the research team. This paper draws on 13 of those interviews, all of which were conducted jointly by the authors. These 13 interviews were selected for in-depth analysis on the basis that they offered the most information on parenting ideals and parenting practices. The interviews were transcribed and sections on attitudes to (involved) fatherhood, parental leave, gender equality, generational change and the general attitude to children and family life in relation to farming realities and strategies were coded and analysed.

Swedish statistics show a tendency for farms to be either very small (almost 80 per cent of all farms have less than 50 ha of arable land) or very large (the top 10 per cent of farms in terms of size manage 50 per cent of Swedish arable land (Statistics Sweden 2014:51). These numbers give a picture of a polarised farm structure with many small farms and several large farms, but few medium-size farms in between. In terms of land ownership Sweden's farm structure is dominated by very small farms, with three out of five self-employed farmers spending less than 25

¹ Some of the data presented in this paper have also been discussed in a popular science report published in Swedish (Hajdu et al. 2020).

per cent of their working time in farming and only 14 per cent working full time or more in farming (Statistics Sweden 2014:139). However, these official numbers include a large number of landowners who lease their land to active farmers, as suggested by the fact that over 60 per cent of farms are currently leasing land (Statistics Sweden, 2014).

Table 1 provides an overview of the 13 farming households interviewed in terms of farm management strategy, operation type and whether they have employees. We categorised our informants into three age groups, with younger farmers defined as those under 45, middle-aged farmers between the ages of 45 and 65, and older farmers over 65. The selection included commercial dairy farmers as well as crop farmers, a couple of small-scale beef farmers and one hobby-scale sheep farmer. All but four farms were predominantly run using family labour.

As Swedish statistics is based on owners of farmland rather than active farmers, it is difficult to pinpoint how our selection of farmers relates to a Swedish average according to criteria such as different production forms or farm management strategies. Our main selection criteria has been to offer as wide a range as possible of farms in terms of size, production focus and management strategies, rather than a representative average. However, with the exception of pig farms and poultry farms, our selection offers examples of farms with the most common production focuses in Sweden and it includes small-scale farms run as one-person operations as well as larger farms run as business partnerships.

4. Findings

4.1. Fathers' attitudes have changed over the generations

The concept of involved fatherhood emerged in interviews with farmers as an ideal and something they were striving to achieve, or with which they contrasted their own ideals. All the men in the present study

Table 1
Informants who participated in the study.

Informants	Management strategy	Operation	Employees	Children
Young <45 with children born year 2000 or later				
Martin	Large-scale dairy farm	One-person operation	Yes	No children
Fredrik	Large-scale crop farm	Business partnership between two men	Yes	1 ♀
Ulrik	Large-scale crop farm	One-person operation	No	1 ♀, 1 ♂
Klara	Small-scale beef farm	Business partnership between two women	No	3 ♀, 2 ♂
Melker	Small-scale dairy farm	Husband and wife joint operation	No	3 ♀, 1 ♂
Middle-aged, 45–65 with children born in the 1990s				
Mattis	Small-scale dairy farm	One-person operation	No	1 ♀, 1 ♂
Pontus	Large-scale crop farm	One-person operation	Yes	2 ♀, 1 ♂
Staffan	Small-scale crop farm	One-person operation	No	1 ♀
Sebastian and Sofia	Large-scale crop farm	One-person operation	No	3 ♂
Retired or retirement age, 65+ with children born in the 1980s and 1970s				
Knut and Kristina	Small-scale beef farm	Husband and wife joint operation	No	1 ♀, 2 ♂
Bosse	Large-scale dairy farm	Business partnership between two men	Yes	1 ♀, 2 ♂
Kurt	Small-scale beef farm	One-person operation	No	3 ♂
Folke	Hobby-scale sheep farm	One-person operation	No	1 ♀, 1 ♂

who were retired or were above retirement age gave a similar view of the mother being the primary caregiver when they had children in the 1970s and 80s. To varying degrees, their parenting consisted of socialising children to farm work or overseeing the children while working. This is in line with the findings of Brandth and Overrein (2013) that fathering takes place in 'workspaces' and that the older generation tends to focus on securing a farm successor by socialising children to farm work. In the middle-aged group who had children in the 1990s onwards, the views of the interviewed men showed considerably more alignment with the ideals of involved fatherhood.

Several of the interviewed dairy farmers mentioned what they saw as the advantages of always being at home (on the farm) and being able to tend to the children between the morning and evening milking routines. One example is Mattis who is in his early 60s and has two children born in the 1990s. He says that the kind of father you are defines you as a man. He says he has always been caring and a primary caregiver for his children when it came to cooking and looking after them when they came home from school. His wife worked off the farm while he, as a dairy farmer, had several hours during the middle of the day when he could look after the children between the morning and evening milking routines. This was in great contrast to his own father, he said, who never cooked or did much work in the home. However, rather than talking of this as him having different values to his own father, he believed that he "takes after his mother".

Like Mattis, Melker, who is around the same age, runs a dairy farm with his wife Mona and said they always share all the work on the farm, both farm work and household work. They had their children, born in the early 1990s, with them in the barn when the children were small, and Melker and Mona took turns cleaning the house and doing the cooking. They did not use daycare for their children because they thought that having to adjust to fixed times when it came to dropping them off and picking them up was tricky because it coincided with the morning milking routines. Melker joked that the only duty they had not shared equally was breastfeeding. Today they have young grandchildren and Melker sees a huge change in attitudes regarding bringing the children into the barn or other types of farm work. His own children will not even let their children enter the barn. Melker believes that parents today are much more anxious and find everything dangerous (cf. Fischer and Burton 2015).

Staffan, one of the middle-aged interviewees, works as an agricultural advisor in addition to running a farm, and has through this role met many young farmers who struggle to practise the ideals of involved fatherhood in everyday life. He sees that compared with when he was young, a lot of young farmers today are married to women who have more challenging salaried work off the farm. While women used to have jobs with less responsibility, he says that today men cannot expect women to work part-time and always be the one to leave early to pick children up from daycare or stay at home with sick children. Another difference he sees is that when he was younger, and especially among his parents' generation, farmers often had most of their social lives tied up with other farmers. All their friends were other farmers and so they were not influenced as much by what kind of family life people with other occupations had, how they divided childcare or parented at home. Today, the farming community is much smaller,² which means that young farmers have friends who have other occupations and they aspire to achieve similar conditions for themselves.

Among the young farmers interviewed, it is clear that they share the view that fathers are expected to take on a greater responsibility for children in general and that this affects them in various ways. Despite

² The reason why the farming community is smaller is due to structural rationalisation, which has led to most farms being consolidated into larger units. Between 1990 and 2017, one in three farms were discontinued in Sweden. Among dairy farms, this trend is even stronger, with seven out of eight farms being discontinued (Statistics Sweden 2019).

expressing a desire to live by these expectations, Fredrik has prioritised building his business at the expense of being an involved father in terms of being emotionally present and involved in childcare. He says that he sees building a robust business as an act of parenting too because the business is something from which the children will benefit later in life: “the business will secure their future”. This points to an attitude aligned with a view about fatherhood as being a provider rather than a caregiver (cf. [Wahlström Henriksson 2020](#)). However, he is displeased with his lack of involvement as a caregiver and wants to be more involved with his second child. He thinks it is unsustainable in the long run for his wife to take on the majority of the work running the household and caring for the children.

Martin is an equally ambitious young dairy farmer keen to expand his business but who currently does not have a partner or children. He considers farming and parenthood to be impossible to combine. He thinks that if you are going to be a parent, you should be fully invested in parenting and not in your business. He is currently fulfilled running his business and has many visions about how to improve and expand it, which he thinks becoming a parent would slow down, something he does not want to see happening. “To become successful, you need to focus all your energy on one thing – and becoming a parent means that you have to focus all your energy on being a parent. I would consider anything else to be bad parenting”, he says. It is remarkable how he in this context does not seem to think of a future partner devoted to parenting as an option, something that could have been seen as self-evident by an ambitious male farmer historically.

Ulrik, however, says that he has had no difficulty combining parenthood with being a farmer. He thinks that it is becoming common today for fathers to be more involved as parents, including among farmers, and he thinks that gender equality in this respect is a positive societal development:

“There is a great difference when it comes to how much responsibility you are expected to take on as a father today compared with the past / ... / I think that’s a healthy change.”

In contrast, Klara, a female farm manager interviewed, says she has made a lot of adjustments to be able to combine farming with parenting. She runs a beef farm with her sister, and both have husbands who have salaried off-farm work. They waited to take over the farm from their father until all their children were toddlers because they thought it would be impossible to start managing the farm while still having babies. After taking over the farm, Klara and her sister put their children – eight between them – into daycare when they were toddlers, but later decided to let them all stay at home until starting school at age six. They came to the conclusion that it was easier to keep them at home than have to drive to and from daycare at fixed times, which disrupted the working day. Klara says that it has generally worked out well keeping the children at home; they learn rules quickly about where they can go and what they can do in order to keep them safe. However, she goes on to say that her own children break the rules more when they have friends over, which means that she has mixed feelings about allowing play dates during her most intensive work periods.

Klara’s story indicates that the expectations farmers have of themselves when it comes to combining parenting and farming are gendered. While most of the male farmers interviewed have been able to run their farm while their wife has taken the majority of parental leave when their children were born, Klara and her sister waited to take over the farm until their children were toddlers and have made adjustments to be able to run a farm while tending to children. The choice Klara and her sister made to keep their children at home and to combine that with farm work, while struggling with a guilty conscience about not inviting other children to come and play on the farm, indicates that they place higher expectations on their own ability to combine farming and parenting.

4.2. Views on combining farming and parental leave

One of the greatest differences between the older generation of farmers interviewed in this study and younger farmers who presently have small children was their attitude towards parental leave. While the generation that had children in the 1990s or earlier had not generally taken parental leave at all or, if so, only for a very limited time, discussions about parental leave surfaced among all the younger farmers. However, for different reasons the younger farmers included in this study have found it difficult to take parental leave to the degree that they felt they wanted to.

Fathers have an opportunity to choose when they can be at home with their child to an extent that their wives cannot, due to most mothers prioritising being at home with their new-born babies in order to breastfeed during the first few months up to a year. Fathers usually take more parental leave towards the end of the child’s first year and into the first half of the second year, with most toddlers starting in daycare at somewhere between 16 and 24 months old. If a father only wishes to take the three months of parental leave earmarked for fathers and leave the rest of the leave to his wife, then those months can be used when farm work is least busy, e.g. during the winter on crop farms.

One such example is Ulrik, who is the sole operator of a crop farm and had two months full time parental leave with his first child during the winter months, meaning that his wife took most of the paid parental leave. His wife works as a salaried dairy farm worker on a neighbouring farm, which made it preferable for her to take the parental leave, Ulrik explained. As a salaried worker she was eligible for a higher parental leave payment in addition to having the ability to take time off work and be replaced by a substitute, which would be more difficult for him as a farm manager. He plans to have a similar period of parental leave with their second child who was a week old at the time of the interview.

In more general discussions about whether or not the fathers in the study have used the parental leave scheme, most farmers were of the opinion that the scheme has little or limited value to them as business owners. One reason for this is that the parental leave payments (like other welfare schemes such as sick leave) are based on taxed income, and most farmers take small salaries in favour of reinvesting profits in the business. Another important reason is that several farmers interviewed could not imagine being able to find someone (including their partner) who has the competence and capacity needed to run the farm if they were to take full-time leave. Furthermore, even if they could find a good replacement, they would have to pay the person much more money than they themselves would receive as a parental leave payment, which would represent a financial loss for their farm business (see [Bekkegen 2002](#) for similar arguments regarding business owners). If the mother has off-farm salaried work, it creates a strong incentive for her to take more parental leave because her parental leave payment will typically be higher and taking parental leave without risk of losing your job is a legislated right in Sweden.

Family planning regarding parental leave is thus tricky for farmers who are sole operators but even more so for joint operations between husbands and wives. One example of how to get round the problem of generating a high enough parental leave payment to compensate for the loss of work is offered by the case of Sebastian and his wife Sofia. They both worked full time on their joint dairy farm when they started planning for starting a family in the mid-1990s. They got round this problem by allocating a higher salary to Sofia when they started discussing having a family in order to generate a higher parental leave payment for her when their first child arrived. The way the parental leave scheme is designed thus requires farmers, as well as other business owners, to plan ahead to ensure they can benefit from the system.

In the early 1990s, it was common for men to be the sole operator on family farms while their wives sought off-farm employment ([Djurfeldt and Waldenström 1996, 1999](#)). There were few farms commercially large enough to have employees in the early 1990s, but these are becoming a more common and a sought-after business model among

commercial full-time farmers today. Fredrik, a young farmer in southern Sweden, runs a large-scale crop farm with a business partner and a few employees, which in theory allows him to be replaced by someone while on parental leave. This has not been the case, however, as Fredrik chose not to take more than a few weeks of parental leave with his first child. The reason he gave for this was that he faced some stressful years when he was starting up his business. It has worked out well, but during those years Fredrik ended up working many more hours than he wanted to and felt he was indispensable.

However, as noted above, Fredrik considers his present workload to be unsustainable and the division of responsibilities between him and his wife when their first child was born to be a failure. They are planning to have a second child and he has decided to take parental leave this time to enable his wife to work full-time. He is convinced that this will be possible since his farm operation has become more stable following several years of rapid expansion, and he no longer thinks that he is indispensable when the company goes into a state of managing current operations rather than expansion. Their farm has been successful, which has enabled Fredrik to take a ‘decent’ salary, and in turns means that his parental leave payment will be sufficient to support the family during his leave. However, he will plan to be on parental leave during the least busy season. Fredrik’s example illustrates how parental leave could potentially be resolved if the farming business is large enough to have several managers or employees and, importantly, if the timing of the birth is right.

4.3. Views on what involved fatherhood means beyond parental leave

The farmers interviewed spoke of a shift in attitudes towards what makes a good childhood, which we interpret as being connected to the shift towards involved fatherhood. They argued that children today are expected to have the possibility of developing their own interests, which involves being taken to activities and encouraged to try out different crafts and hobbies. To a greater extent, parents are also expected to not only drop children off at their activities but also to be actively involved in various ways, thus spending more time doing activities with the children off the farm. This change makes it more difficult to feel like a ‘good farmer’ and a ‘good parent’ at the same time.

Knut and Kristina, a middle-aged couple, talk about these expectations a lot in their interview. In 1995, when their children were teenagers, they moved from a farm close to a rural town to one more isolated. They feel that this affected the children negatively as they were not able to give them the type of leisure activities they wanted to have and had been accustomed to. Nevertheless, they thought that their children had far lower expectations about leisure activities than children have today. “We could never have managed to bring up our children the way our grandchildren are being raised today, with sports tournaments and the like that parents attend all day. That would have been impossible,” says Knut. Their children had to make do with activities nearby, but they had advantages too, such as being able to keep horses and pets in a way that would have been difficult had they been brought up in a town.

Changing expectations on farming fathers also surfaced when it came to discussions about going on holiday. Fredrik and Ulrik, the two young male farmers with children in this study, both emphasise that they have prioritised going on holiday with their children. Fredrik says he has even been able to squeeze in a week of holiday during the very busy summer months. Ulrik says that he often does spontaneous shorter trips with the children outside the crop-growing season and sees that flexibility as an advantage of being a crop farmer. Had he been an animal producer, he would have been more tied to the farm, he explains. In contrast, Melker, who had children in the 1990s, says that he and his wife Mona never prioritised taking a holiday because they did not trust others to take care of their dairy cows when they were away. When their children were older, they started complaining about never having been abroad on holiday like other children so Melker took the family on a road trip to a popular beach resort in Denmark for a day. “When the kids tell this story,

they say that ‘daddy stood there saying that we had to take a quick dip in the ocean because we had to get home to the cows’”, Melker reminisces seemingly fondly and without the guilt most contemporary parents would have felt about not being able to give to their children what other children had. The story also portrays Melker in the role of driving the car taking the children on holiday, rather than actively playing with them on the beach or in the sea. While Melker sees farming as a way of life that unavoidably has effects on family life, younger farmers are more likely to aspire to provide their children with a similar upbringing to that of other, non-farming families.

A pattern among most of the farmers interviewed who are middle-aged and raised children in the 80s and 90s is that they tend to speak of a good childhood less in terms of off-farm activities, such as leisure activities and holidays, and more in terms of having a rural lifestyle. To them, growing up on a farm is in itself a good starting point for a good childhood and it is clear from several statements that they feel they do not need to activate or play with the children in order to provide them with a good childhood. Rather, it is seen as important to teach the children work ethic and taking responsibility. One of the informants said that “childhood is not supposed to be an eternal holiday”.

The stories from the older farmers indicate that spending as much time as possible with your children, as involved fatherhood ideals suggest, was not part of their ideal of how family life was supposed to be. Their emphasis on the importance of a strong work ethic and commitment suggests that they fit more with the view of fatherhood as being a provider (cf. Wahlström Henriksson 2020). This is also directly aligned with the findings presented by Berit Brandth (2019) that older generations of farming fathers were focused on socialising children to farm work, fostering a strong work ethic and securing a farm successor. The younger farmers place a much stronger emphasis on allowing their children the freedom to choose path in life, even if this includes them being averse to farm work and it results in not securing a farm successor. The goal of raising children who can freely choose their life paths and interests has trumped the goal of making sure the farm stays in the family.

5. Conclusions

Our study suggests that farming men engage in childcare and fatherhood practices in different ways that cannot easily be explained only by farm management strategies. However, some notable patterns and differences between the farmers could be noted in terms of age or generation, the degree of flexibility that different farms offer in terms of taking time off during the day or for holidays, and how fathers view their own indispensability at the farm.

When it comes to age, the men who raised children in the 1980s or 90s seemed to adhere to what Brandth and Overrein (2013) describe as parenting by bringing children into adult workspaces, rather than participating in children’s own activities. This is an expected result and reflects wider societal changes in terms of norms and ideals regarding parenthood. In line with this, younger farmers with children talked more about childcare both in terms of looking after babies’ and young children’s basic needs, as well as playing with the children, rather than bringing children with them as they do farm work.

When it came to flexibility, the size of the farm, or rather the number and timing of hours worked, plays a role. Those operating smaller farms or employing less time-consuming farm practices highlighted the positive aspects of combining farming with fatherhood in terms of being able to spend time with the children when they come home from school, something a typical daytime job would have prevented. A notable example is a small-scale dairy farm where the work-intensive milking takes place during mornings and evening, leaving space for spending the afternoon with the children and preparing dinner for them. However, it is difficult to hand over a farm run by a single operator to a temporary employee during full-time parental leave. One reason for this is that it is hard to find and be able to afford someone with the right competence

and level of commitment to take on full responsibility for the farm during a limited time. This means that a single operator farmer often sees himself as indispensable and thus considers being on full-time parental leave impossible. An exception to this is grain farmers who might be able to be on full-time leave during winter months as the farm business can be idle during that time.

Large farm operators experienced inflexibility by being responsible for employees or large numbers of animals, for example, and found themselves in a position that they believed made achieving a work-family balance more difficult. However, large (successful) farm operators could also be better equipped to utilise welfare schemes such as paid holidays, sick leave and parental leave since all such payments are based on income and one-person operations tend to reinvest most of the revenues in the business, rather than paying a high salary to the owner. While a smaller, sole-operator farm is difficult to hand over to someone during full parental leave, a larger farm with several operators and employees potentially has the necessary human resources and economic stability to allow men to take several months of full parental leave and be the primary caregiver for their children during that time. There was no such example among our interviewees, although one operator of a farm like this said he was planning to take full-time parental leave with his next child.

In conclusion, while our sample size is small, all younger male farmers interviewed reflected the changing attitudes towards caregiving and involved fatherhood seen in wider Swedish society. The older generations also talked about seeing this shift in their children's generation, sometimes being affected by it themselves, but to a lesser degree. The next generation of male farmers in Sweden are increasingly looking for ways to be able to take parental leave despite the continuing challenges posed by the restructuring of Swedish farming, which has meant that many farms today are run by single male operators and are difficult to hand over to a replacement while on full-time leave. Our results indicates that some types of farms have better potential to offer men opportunities to fulfil their desires to take a more active part in childcare, notably larger farms where no individual is considered indispensable, as well as smaller dairy farms with high flexibility regarding how time is spent throughout the day, or as in the case of grain farms, over the year. In order to allow a more even balance between farming and fatherhood in the future however, farm management practices may need to be further renegotiated to allow for farmers to be primary caregivers.

Our interviews suggest that attitudes may have shifted faster than what has so far been possible to accommodate practically. However, farming fathers might be able to use parental leave more if they changed farm management strategy, or if the parental leave scheme could be adjusted to the conditions of self-employed farmers. A solution to the dilemma of aspiring to but not feeling able to use parental leave might lead to benefits for these men, their children, and possibly by extension to greater gender equality in Swedish farming. Even if parental leave is not equal to greater gender equality, and it is possible to be an involved parent in many ways without having been able to take parental leave, finding ways to enable farming fathers to take longer parental leave would represent a step in a desired direction.

Author statement

Camilla Eriksson: Conceptualization; Data curation; Formal analysis; Funding acquisition; Methodology; Writing – original draft; Writing – review & editing. Flora Hajdu: Conceptualization; Data curation; Funding acquisition; Methodology; Project administration; Writing – review & editing.

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