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# Educational inequalities in parental care time: Cross-national evidence from Belgium, Denmark, Spain, and the United Kingdom

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## ABSTRACT

This study uses time-diary data for dual-earner couples from Belgium, Denmark, Spain, and the United Kingdom to analyze educational inequalities in parental care time in different national contexts. For mothers, education is significantly associated with parenting involvement only in Spain and the United Kingdom. In Spain these differences are largely explained by inequalities in mothers' time and monetary resources, but not in the United Kingdom, where less-educated mothers disproportionately work in short part-time jobs. For fathers, education is associated with parenting time in Denmark, and particularly in Spain, while the wife's resources substantially drive these associations. On weekends, the educational gradient in parental care time applies only to Spain and the United Kingdom, two countries with particularly large inequalities in parents' opportunities to engage in parenting. The study shows country variations in educational inequalities in parenting, suggesting that socioeconomic resources, especially from mothers, shape important variations in parenting involvement.

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## 1. Introduction

Parental care involvement is an essential activity for child wellbeing (Bianchi et al., 2006; Gauthier et al., 2004). Parents are aware of their crucial role as care providers and tend to be strongly motivated to engage in child care (Hallberg and Klevmarken, 2003). Yet, the way parents participate in parenting activities differs substantially across the population (Monna and Gauthier, 2008). Scholars paid special attention to analyze social inequalities in parental care time, in order to better understand how the reproduction of social inequality operates in the family (Bodovski and Farkas, 2008; Lareau, 2003). Previous studies typically found that highly educated parents, as compared to less-educated parents, are more involved in different types of child care activities linked to children's socio-emotional and cognitive skills, which in turn plays an important role in the advantage of privileged children in schooling and the labor market (Craig, 2006a; Kalil et al., 2012).

At the micro level, scholars argued that *parenting norms* influence the educational gradient in parenting. Highly-educated parents are expected to be particularly identified with contemporary norms of intensive parenting, having

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ambitious educational and labor market aspirations for their children that allow them to reproduce their social status (Lareau, 2003; Kalil et al., 2012; Kohn, 1977). Also, socioeconomic disparities in *time and monetary resources* are expected to play an important role. Parents from affluent social backgrounds owe privileged resources to organize parental care activities, as they tend to have high levels of control and autonomy over their work time and schedules, as well as income power to outsource domestic labor, thus maximizing their capacities to allocate time to parenting activities (Bianchi et al., 2004). Yet, how socioeconomic factors influence educational inequalities in parenting time remains understudied.

At the macro level, we can understand how socioeconomic factors influence educational differences in parental care time by studying different *national contexts*. Sayer et al. (2004) argued that educational inequalities in parenting involvement are partly a byproduct of governments' universal provision of monetary and time resources to families, such as universal family-friendly policies to employed parents and monetary transfers to low-income families, which can moderate existing inequalities in parents' opportunities to engage in parenting. Yet, the literature has offered inconclusive evidence on how education influences parental care time across national contexts. The study of Dotti-Sani and Treas (2016) on 11 industrialized countries finds a positive educational gradient in maternal and paternal child care across virtually all countries. Other studies, however, reveal some clear cross-national differences in the effects of education on maternal care time (Guryan et al., 2008), as well as paternal care time (Sayer et al., 2004).

One clear gap in the literature is the insufficient attention paid to how socioeconomic resources influence educational disparities in parenting participation. The educational gradient in parenting, even when parenting norms differ across levels of education, can arguably diminish after accounting for the relative advantage of highly educated parents (i.e., use of job autonomy or income to maximize parental care time). However, the analytical approach of previous studies did not provide clear insights into how socioeconomic resources shape educational variations in parenting involvement. By studying this question, and do it in different national contexts, scholars can better understand the possible mechanisms leading to social inequalities in parental care involvement.

In this study, we analyze how employed parents with different levels of education spend time in child care activities by using time-diary data on couples from Belgium, Denmark, Spain, and the United Kingdom. These four countries show interesting variations to analyze this question. In Denmark, public institutions offer ample universal support to families with children, irrespective of their social background, as well as active work-family balance policies, income redistribution programs, and generous monetary transfers to low-skilled parents (Bonke and Esping-Andersen, 2011; Craig and Mullan, 2011; Esping-Andersen, 2009). In Belgium, public institutions provide generous cash transfers and universal family-friendly policies, while educational inequalities in income resources are generally modest (Ghysels, 2004; OECD, 2015). By contrast, Spain and the United Kingdom have a type of public policy that generally provides limited support to disadvantaged families, while both countries display large educational inequalities in parents' time and monetary resources (Gracia and Esping-Andersen, 2015; Esping-Andersen, 1999; Lewis, 2009; OECD, 2015). Altogether, these four cases offer a relevant comparative framework to study educational inequalities in parental care time.

The paper makes three main contributions. First, this study offers new *individual-level* evidence on how socioeconomic factors influence educational inequalities in parental care time in different national contexts. We consider in our analyses, like previous studies do, individuals' employment status (Sayer et al., 2004; Guryan et al., 2008), but also other understudied measures with potential influence on educational inequalities in parental care time, such as income levels and work schedules. This approach is particularly relevant when comparing our countries of study, with clear educational differences in monetary resources, time availability or employment profiles.

Second, we analyze how the *spouse's socioeconomic resources* influence parents' child care time. Parents often negotiate and coordinate their child care activities with the spouse, and can be highly responsive to the partner's time constraints and resources (Presser, 1994; Raley et al., 2012). Studies on specific countries found that the spouse's resources, specifically the wife's resources, influence parental care time, partly capturing the educational gap in parent-child time (Gimenez-Nadal and Molina, 2013; Gracia, 2015; Hays, 1996; England and Srivastava, 2013; Raley et al., 2012). These studies arguably capture gendered relations by which privileged women use their resources to foster men's egalitarian child care involvement. These studies typically focused on specific countries, mostly Anglo-Saxon countries, and often missed important variables of the spouse's resources and time constraints, such as the partner's income, employment constraints, and work schedules. Our study provides a couple perspective to different national contexts that helps us to better understand educational inequalities in parenting.

Third, we analyze educational differences in parental care, not only on weekdays, but also on weekends. On weekends, parents can engage in key parenting activities, such as socializing or playing with children, and supervising developmental activities. Parents, and particularly fathers, can increase their child care time on weekends, due to relatively high levels of free time on weekends (Hook and Wolfe, 2012; Yeung et al., 2001). But how education affects parents' participation in child care during weekends remains unclear. Less-skilled parents disproportionately work on weekends, and have limited resources to outsource demanding housework activities often scheduled at these days (Bianchi et al., 2004; Presser, 2003). Thus, college-educated parents might be privileged to spend time in child care on weekends, as a result of their relative advantage in time availability to engage in parenting. The focus on weekends in countries with different levels of educational inequalities in monetary and time resources, offers new relevant insights into the parenting literature.

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