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MEN’S ATTITUDES TOWARDS SHARED PARENTAL LEAVE

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ABSTRACT

Uptake of Shared Parental Leave (SPL) in the UK remains poor, with fewer than 2% of eligible fathers utilising the policy since its introduction in 2015. With limited extant research addressing the policy, reasons behind the low level of uptake remain unclear. Specifically, the role of work (family supportive organisation perceptions [FSOP]) and gender-related factors (perceived social identity threat and traditional gender role orientation) in men’s attitudes towards SPL have been largely overlooked. Addressing this gap, this study sought to identify the extent to which work and gender-related factors influenced employed men’s attitudes towards SPL, utilising social role theory to understand the mechanisms underpinning these relationships. A survey of 120 employed men living and working in the UK captured attitudes towards SPL, traditional gender role orientation, perceived social identity threat, and FSOP. Results showed that perceived social identity threat was positively associated with traditional gender role orientation. Traditional gender role orientation was, in turn, the mechanism through which FSOP and perceived social identity threat affected attitudes towards SPL. At low levels, FSOP moderated the relationship between perceived social identity threat and traditional gender role orientation, but did not moderate the indirect effect between perceived threat and attitudes towards SPL. Theoretical contributions and recommendations for organisations to improve workplace gender equality are discussed.

Keywords: Shared Parental Leave, SPL, Paternity Leave, Parental Leave Attitudes, Gender Roles, Gender Pay Gap
Introduction

Despite the United Kingdom (UK)’s progress toward gender equality, focus on parity in parental leave offerings has lagged, contributing to the endurance of the traditional male breadwinner model (Kaufman, 2018; Lewis et al., 2008). Accordingly, many women retain primary responsibility for childrearing, perpetuating a traditional division of labour and reducing their ability to participate equally in the workplace (Atkinson, 2017). To address this issue, the UK coalition government introduced the policy of Shared Parental Leave (SPL) in 2015 (GOV.UK, 2023b). SPL enables mothers to share up to 50 of their 52-week maternity leave allowance with their partner (the first two weeks of which constitute mandatory post-childbirth leave, although fathers may also remain home during these two weeks; GOV.UK, 2023b). Statutory Shared Parental Pay (ShPP), currently paid at £172.48 a week or 90% of average weekly earnings, whichever is lower, may also be received for the first 37 weeks. However, this policy has been largely under-utilised; less than 2% of eligible fathers used SPL between 2015-2020 (EMW, 2021; Working Families, 2016).

Despite the importance of SPL for equality within the workplace and the home, particularly in regard to changing the gendered nature of caring responsibilities and reducing inequalities, researchers in the UK have thus far focussed largely on policy-related barriers to uptake. Such barriers include the strict eligibility criteria (i.e., the minimum earning requirement) (Trades Union Congress, 2015), the low level of statutory pay, and perceived maternal gatekeeping (Birkett & Forbes, 2019). Comparatively, research into attitudinal barriers has been largely overlooked, with attitudinal research focussing predominantly on adjacent topics such as gender roles (e.g., Schober & Scott, 2012) or parental leave more broadly (e.g., Kaufman et al., 2023).

One important set of barriers to SPL uptake is work (family supportive organisation perceptions [FSOP]) and gender- (perceived social identity threat and traditional gender role
orientation) related factors, such as aspects of workplace culture and gendered expectations of behaviour. Given men’s greater earnings on average, the affordability of men taking parental leave is often cited as a barrier to take-up (Twamley, 2021). However, Pettigrew and Duncan’s (2021) research from Canada, where parental leave is topped up to 93% of salary and thus financial concerns are less of a deciding factor, revealed that gendered attitudes toward childcare and negative impressions of the impact of fathers’ leave use on co-workers were common. Managers were found to be less positive than employees about fathers taking leave and perceptions of parental leave as extra vacation time were rife. Even in Sweden, widely known for its gender equality policies, women continue to take nearly two thirds of all parental leave (Nordic Statistics, 2020), and research shows that workplace norms characterised by masculine values for prioritising work over caregiving discourage fathers from taking parental leave (Haas & Hwang, 2019).

Only one study has considered the role of work and gender-related factors in men’s attitudes towards SPL in the UK, with an emphasis on financial and policy barriers (i.e., the low level of statutory pay) contributing to low uptake (Birkett & Forbes, 2019). As policy barriers ultimately rely upon government intervention for improvement, organisations are limited in how they may use existing research findings to improve male employees’ uptake of the current, available SPL policy. Furthermore, research from Denmark has suggested that government policy intervention may lead only to temporary changes in men’s parental leave use, indicating that levels of uptake may decline if policies later regress (Birkett & Forbes, 2019; Bloksgaard & Rostgaard, 2016). Whilst the Danish policy was short lived (four years in length), this case study is nonetheless relevant given the dearth of research in this area, providing valuable longitudinal evidence that an intervention of this length is still unlikely to affect attitudes. It may therefore be argued that to see lasting and relevant change, the role of work and gender-related factors in men’s attitudes towards SPL should be considered. The
identification of such factors may enable organisations to implement interventions to improve these attitudes, thereby creating lasting change that is not reliant upon vacillating government policy.

In the present research, we seek to improve understanding of whether work and gender-related factors are associated with employed men’s attitudes towards SPL. In doing so, we investigate the extent to which attitudes towards SPL can be predicted by FSOP, a work factor, and perceived social identity threat, a gender-related factor assessing opinions regarding societal structures. We also examine whether gender role orientation, a second gender-related factor, mediates the effect of perceived social identity threat on attitudes towards SPL. Finally, we assess whether the indirect effect of perceived social identity threat on attitudes towards SPL, via gender role orientation, is moderated by FSOP (see Figure 1 for our conceptual model). We draw on social role theory (Eagly, 1987) to better understand the mechanisms linking these three factors to men’s attitudes towards SPL. To obtain a comprehensive understanding of male employees’ attitudes towards SPL, this sample includes fathers and non-fathers.

The aim of our exploratory research is to improve knowledge about effective mechanisms to promote SPL. Further, it is our hope that by enhancing organisations’ abilities to create cultures supportive of SPL utilisation, there will ultimately be implications for advancing gender equality in UK workplaces. We seek to make two key contributions. First, to our knowledge, existing literature has not yet focussed exclusively on men’s attitudes towards SPL in the UK. This is important because research shows that men face particular social constraints and workplace penalties when taking or requesting parental leave. For example, US research has linked men’s use of flexible workplace policies with harassment and mistreatment (e.g., Berdahl & Moon, 2013) as well as poor work outcomes, including demotion (Rudman & Mescher, 2013). Moreover, other men can play an important role in these
evaluations. In comparison to women, men are likely to rate male leave-takers’ organisational behaviour less favourably (e.g., Wayne & Cordeiro, 2003) and are more likely to believe that leave-taking should negatively impact one’s career (e.g., Gaines et al., 2019). Further, research from Japan found that men are less willing to take paternity leave if they believe their colleagues hold negative attitudes towards such policies (Miyajima et al., 2017). This is corroborated by research from the US showing that family policies only improve men’s desire for progressive relationships if they believe that most men of their age prefer the same arrangements (Thébaud & Pedulla, 2016). Whilst not specific to the UK, these studies form part of the wider conversation in a field in which there is a dearth of research on men’s attitudes towards parental leave and to which the present study contributes. Accordingly, extending past research, we seek to shed light on how work and gender-related factors may affect men’s attitudes towards SPL, carefully considering the roles of gendered norms and male social dynamics by exclusively focussing on male respondents.

Second, to our knowledge, our research is the first to quantitatively measure attitudes towards SPL in non-fathers. Most studies have focused solely on fathers, ignoring the opinions of men who may use the policy in future and/or whose views contribute to a workplace climate for or against parental leave-taking (e.g., Miyajima et al., 2017). We include men who are not fathers to better elucidate antecedents to men’s attitudes towards SPL, with an eye toward developing practical interventions for changing negative attitudes across organisations. Furthermore, whilst there is a body of quantitative research about fatherhood and childcare in the UK context (e.g., Norman et al., 2014), the majority of UK SPL literature has taken a qualitative approach. Thus, we adopt a quantitative lens to identify and test associations between a number of work and gender-related factors.
SPL: The UK Context

Within the UK, parental leave policies have historically favoured mothers, lagging behind much of Europe in provisions for fathers (Banister & Kerrane, 2022; Kaufman, 2018). Statutory paid paternity leave was not introduced until 2003, when new fathers were granted two weeks off work to care for their child (Women and Equalities Committee, 2018). This policy remains unchanged in 2023. Later, in 2011, fathers were permitted to take between two and 26 weeks at home through the use of an alternative offering, Additional Paternity Leave (APL). APL could only be utilised from the 20th week after the adoption or birth of a child (Kaufman, 2018), and the policy was subsequently replaced with the more flexible SPL. SPL allows mothers (or primary adopters) to share up to 50 of their 52-week entitlement with their partner (the first two weeks of which constitute mandatory post-childbirth leave), replacing both maternity and paternity leave. To ensure flexibility, SPL may be taken in up to three separate blocks, either by both parents together or at different times (GOV.UK, 2023b). Additionally, ShPP (currently paid at £172.48 a week or 90% of average weekly earnings, whichever is lower) may be received for the first 37 weeks. To be eligible for both SPL and ShPP, both parents must: have been continuously employed by the same organisation for at least 26 weeks; stay with the same employer whilst utilising SPL; remain employees not workers (e.g., freelance or temporary workers); and earn at least £123 per week (GOV.UK, 2023b).

Prior to the introduction of SPL, attitudes about such a policy were largely positive. In a 2005 report from the Equal Opportunities Commission, 83% of fathers expressed support for transferable maternity leave, with a further 70% stating they would use it. The actual usage figure of below 2% (EMW, 2021) belies the benefits that can be observed when fathers take longer parental leaves. For example, paternity leave length is associated with improved father engagement (Petts & Knoester, 2018), greater relationship satisfaction in mothers (Petts &
Knoester, 2019), and increased household incomes through growth in mothers’ wages (Andersen, 2018). Furthermore, fathers’ leave length is associated with a reduction in the gender pay gap, as a more gender-equal division of caring responsibilities assists in reducing the ‘pay penalty’ faced by women when becoming mothers (Johansson, 2010). Paternity leave is also associated with a decreased risk of death in fathers, likely due to corresponding improvements in health behaviours and increased risk aversion (Månsdotter et al., 2007).

Current Understanding of Male Parental Leave Decisions

Whilst there is considerable international literature on parental leave (e.g., Birkett & Forbes, 2019; Gartzia et al., 2018; Kaufman, 2018; McKay & Doucet, 2010; Miyajima et al., 2017; Petts et al., 2018), policy and welfare discrepancies alongside differing societal norms make international comparison difficult, highlighting the value of UK-centric literature when considering SPL in particular. Very few studies have sought to understand reasons behind the low level of SPL uptake among UK men, and only a handful of academic papers on the policy are published to date. Approximately half of this literature is comprised of valuable reviews of the policy itself (e.g., Atkinson, 2017; Busby & Weldon-Johns, 2019; Javornik & Oliver, 2019; Mitchell, 2015; Mitchell, 2019; Mitchell, 2023), leaving a small volume of research exploring individual or organisational barriers to uptake (e.g., Birkett & Forbes, 2019; Milner, 2022; Ndzi, 2017; Ndzi 2023; Twamley & Schober, 2019; Twamley, 2021). There is also limited research into the policy’s predecessor, APL (e.g., Kaufman, 2018; Koslowski & Kadar-Satat, 2019). Within these studies, a number of barriers to SPL uptake have been identified. For example, the low level of statutory pay means that many fathers cannot afford to take SPL (Birkett & Forbes, 2019; Ndzi, 2023) and the strict eligibility criteria (i.e., the minimum earning requirement) means that up to two-fifths of employed fathers with a child younger than one year are not entitled to take SPL due to their partner’s employment status (Trades Union
Congress, 2015). Perceived maternal gatekeeping and assumed reluctance of mothers to shorten their leave have also been identified as barriers (Birkett & Forbes, 2019).

We propose that financial and policy barriers cannot fully address reasons why 98% of eligible fathers opt not to use SPL. Whilst there are undoubtedly clear financial barriers to SPL uptake, global evidence demonstrates that factors on both an individual and organisational level, such as perceived workplace resistance and gendered expectations (e.g., Banister & Kerrane, 2022; Gartzia et al., 2018; Kaufman, 2018; McKay & Doucet, 2010; Miyajima et al., 2017; Ndzi, 2023; Petts et al., 2018), are also likely to affect men’s use of parental leave. Therefore, further research is required to identify barriers to uptake, with one important (yet overlooked) topic in the UK literature being the influence of work and gender-related factors.

Theory and Hypotheses Development

Social Role Theory
We draw on social role theory (Eagly, 1987) to elucidate the importance of culture in men’s attitudes towards SPL. Social role theory posits that gender roles are societal expectations which apply to individuals on the basis of their gender. It is proposed that these expectations lead men and women to behave in accordance with their appropriate ‘roles’, reinforcing societal expectations over time and fostering real differences in behaviour between the sexes (Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Wood, 2012; Eckes & Trautner, 2012). For example, in a study of dual earner couples in China, Dou et al. (2022) demonstrated that work-to-family conflict led to lower job satisfaction for wives but not for husbands, as women were more likely than men to see the work infringement as a threat to their identity in accordance with gender role expectations. Thus, in line with social role theory, we suggest that men are less likely to take extra parental leave due to the conflict this poses with society’s expectations, ultimately reinforcing gender-typical behaviours and beliefs. More specifically, it is proposed that the
consistent coupling of women in caregiving positions and men in breadwinning roles causes the mistaken belief that inherently, men are better suited to the working environment whilst women are more nurturing (Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Wood, 2012). Consequently, breaches of these assumed gender roles are feared to incite backlash (Butler & Skattebo, 2004). In accordance with this proposition, research has shown that UK employers typically expect men to take short parental leaves (Kaufman & Almqvist, 2017), leading male employees to fear that they will cause disruption or face workplace penalties if utilising additional family entitlements (EHRC, 2009; Kaufman, 2018). Thus, work and gender-related factors on a social and organisational level are likely to affect men’s attitudes towards SPL, in part due to the fear of backlash following gender role violation. Social role theory further posits that gender roles are a dynamic aspect of culture, which change in response to alterations in typical distributions of labour. This would indicate that it is possible for gendered behavioural expectations and internalised beliefs regarding these to evolve over time, highlighting the importance of attitudinal change towards egalitarian policies such as SPL.

**Work and Gender-Related Factors and Associations with Attitudes Towards SPL**

We focus on three constructs that are central to the UK parental leave literature: perceived social identity threat, traditional gender role orientation, and FSOP. We propose that perceived social identity threat will predict traditional gender orientation, and that traditional gender role orientation will mediate the relationship between this variable and attitudes towards SPL. We further propose that FSOP will moderate the relationship between perceived social identity threat and traditional gender role orientation, and also the indirect effect of perceived social identity threat on attitudes towards SPL via traditional gender role orientation. Below, we briefly explain and justify the inclusion of each factor.
Perceived Social Identity Threat and Traditional Gender Role Orientation

Perceived social identity threat arises when a group’s positive social identity is undermined (Scheepers et al., 2009). This variable measures men’s fears that as women become increasingly present and successful in the workplace, men may lose their high-powered position within society due to a reduction in the socio-economic power generated by being the dominant presence in the UK workforce (Scheepers et al., 2009). Extant research has demonstrated that men can find the integration of women in work settings threatening, due to the implication that males’ dominant position within society is being reduced (Renfro et al., 2006; Scheepers et al., 2009).

Gender role orientation describes one’s attitude towards the gendered division of labour, whereby traditional individuals believe women should fulfil family obligations whilst men focus on work (Judge & Livingston, 2008). This factor operationalises key themes identified in qualitative research on parental leave, whereby gendered cultural expectations can impede SPL and APL use (Birkett & Forbes, 2019; Kaufman, 2018).

Taking these two variables, we speculate that men’s traditional gender role orientation will increase in response to high levels of perceived social identity threat, in an effort to reaffirm the positive image of themselves as the dominant gender. Research has indicated that traditional gender role orientation can be predicted by various cultural and environmental factors (e.g., marital status, region; Judge & Livingston, 2008); thus, we predict that men who perceive women’s integration within the workplace as threatening may be more likely to believe that men should exclusively fulfil the ‘work’ role.

**H1: Perceived social identity threat will be positively related to traditional gender role orientation.**

We further speculate that through traditional gender role orientation, men with higher perceived social identity threat will have more negative attitudes towards SPL. Perceived social
identity threat has been shown to subconsciously rise in response to mere discussion around changing gender relations (Scheepers et al., 2009), indicating that men are susceptible to increased feelings of threat from a number of environmental influences and events within the workplace; for example, discussions around gender diversity. As a result of such events, men may find themselves turning to the well-established system of traditional gender ideology to rationalise and alleviate the uncomfortable feelings of threat they are experiencing, and correct the perceived imbalance that they have faced. In turn, as SPL directly challenges traditional gender roles, men with stronger support for traditional divisions of labour may hold less favourable attitudes towards the policy. Indeed, research has consistently demonstrated that individuals who espouse a traditional gender ideology are less likely to support male parental leave utilisation, whilst men with egalitarian orientations rate male leave-takers more favourably (e.g., Gartzia et al., 2018; Kaufman et al., 2023; Petts et al., 2018; Stertz et al., 2017).

Accordingly, we hypothesise:

\[ H2: \text{Traditional gender role orientation will mediate the relationship between perceived social identity threat and attitudes towards SPL.} \]

**FSOP (Family Supportive Organisation Perceptions)**

FSOP is defined as an employee’s perception of the extent to which their organisation is family supportive (Allen, 2001). This factor operationalises key themes from qualitative UK research, whereby unsupportive workplace culture and perceived resistance towards men utilising SPL or APL can act as barriers to uptake (Birkett & Forbes, 2019; Kaufman, 2018). Furthermore, UK parents expect men to face greater repercussions than women for leave-taking (Kaufman, 2018), suggesting that men with lower FSOP may report especially negative attitudes towards SPL due to fears the policy will lead to workplace penalties for men in particular. These
findings align with wider research about greater perceived organisational family support improving men’s use of family policies (e.g., McKay & Doucet, 2010).

We theorise that the relationship between perceived social identity threat and traditional gender role orientation will be moderated by FSOP, such that when FSOP is low, the relationship will be strengthened. Specifically, men who work in organisations which are less supportive of men taking an active role in family life may be less likely to believe in an egalitarian distribution of labour, as the social norms surrounding expected gender roles and behaviour are weighted towards a more traditional approach. Thus, these men are likely to feel stronger feelings of threat regarding the changing status quo in the workplace, and demonstrate higher support for traditional gender roles. Indeed, Thébaud and Pedulla (2016) discovered that family policies improve men’s desire for egalitarian relationships only when they believe their peers prefer the same arrangements, highlighting the interaction between family policy and perceived male cultural norms. In turn, we predict that FSOP will moderate the mediating effect of traditional gender role orientation on the relationship between perceived social identity threat and attitudes towards SPL. Therefore, we hypothesise:

H3: FSOP will moderate the relationship between perceived social identity threat and traditional gender role orientation, such that when FSOP is low the relationship will be strengthened.

H4: The indirect effect of perceived social identity threat on attitudes towards SPL, via gender role orientation, is moderated by FSOP such that the indirect effect is weaker when FSOP is high, and stronger when FSOP is low.

Method

Participants
A total of 161 employed adult men living and working in the UK took part in this study. One hundred and three participants were recruited from the UK branch of a multinational electronics organisation, actioned through the first researcher’s contacts. To increase the sample size, an additional 58 participants were recruited from social media, after which the samples were combined. Whilst it was recognised that this convenience sampling methodology would limit the generalisability of results, given the exploratory nature of the research this concern was outweighed by the need to bolster the sample size and subsequent power of the statistical models in the absence of resources to access to a larger participant pool. During data cleaning 41 respondents were removed: five were outliers, and 36 were incomplete responses. We conducted a t-test on attitudes towards SPL to test for differences between participants who were excluded and those who were retained. The test confirmed that there were no significant differences in attitudes towards SPL ($t(134) = 0.93, p = .352$). Thus, the final sample consisted of 120 respondents, aged between 21 and 68 years ($M = 42.51, SD = 12.22$). While 74.2% of respondents reported that they had heard of SPL prior to completing the questionnaire, none had used SPL in the past; 45.8% had utilised paternity leave, 0.8% had used APL, and 19.2% had taken no parental leave. Participant demographics are presented in Table I.

**Procedure**

Respondents accessed the questionnaire through an anonymous Qualtrics link. Upon opening the link, respondents were presented with an informed consent page which explained the study’s objectives, voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity, and their right to withdraw during the questionnaire. They were then provided with an information sheet detailing SPL in clear terms. Scales were presented sequentially, with the questionnaire taking approximately 20 minutes to complete. Once finished, respondents were presented with a
written debrief. Full ethical approval for the study was obtained prior to its commencement at the first author’s institution.

**Measures**

Responses to all measures were captured in a 5-point Likert scale from one (*strongly disagree*) to five (*strongly agree*).

*Perceived Social Identity Threat* was measured using the three-item Perceived Threat scale (Elkins et al., 2002). As this was originally developed for female respondents, one item was adapted to say ‘female’ instead of ‘male’. Higher scores indicated greater perceived social identity threat. A sample item is: “If I applied for a promotion to a managerial position, it is likely that I would be discriminated against on the basis of my gender”. Cronbach’s alpha was .78.

*Traditional Gender Role Orientation* was measured using the five-item Gender Role Orientation scale (Judge & Livingston, 2008), adapted and validated from questions within the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth questionnaire (e.g., National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1987). Higher scores indicated more traditional gender role orientation. A sample item is: “A wife with a family has no time for outside employment.” Cronbach’s alpha was .86.

*FSOP* was measured using the 14-item Family Supportive Organisation Perceptions scale (Allen, 2001). Higher scores indicated more positive perceptions of one’s organisation’s family support. A sample item is: “Expressing involvement and interest in nonwork matters is viewed as healthy.” Eleven items were reverse scored during analysis. Cronbach’s alpha was .76.
Attitudes Towards SPL was measured using the five-item Attitudes Towards Paternity Leave scale (Miyajima et al., 2017). Each item was adapted to say ‘Shared Parental Leave’ instead of ‘Paternity Leave’. Higher scores indicated more positive attitudes towards SPL. A sample item is: “I have a positive attitude towards SPL.” Cronbach’s alpha was .80.

Control Variable

Age was included as control variable because age may negatively predict attitudes towards men using parental leave, and is also associated with sexist beliefs (Gartzia et al., 2018; Thornton et al., 1983). Age was reported in years.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS Statistics version 26 and PROCESS version 3.4. Descriptive statistics and correlations between study variables are presented in Table II. Attitudes towards SPL was positively correlated with FSOP, and negatively correlated with traditional gender role orientation. Age was positively correlated with being a manager ($r = .36, p < .001$), indicating that the views of older men in this sample were more representative of individuals higher in seniority.

Tests of Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1 predicted that perceived social identity threat would be positively correlated with traditional gender role orientation. We used ordinary least squares regression to test this hypothesis, controlling for age. To assess the power and minimum sample needed to run the regression model, an a priori power analysis was conducted using G*Power version 3.1.9.6 (Faul et al., 2009). Results indicated that the minimum sample size to achieve 0.80 power for
detecting a medium effect with a significance criterion of $\alpha = .05$ was 29, suggesting that the sample size of 120 in the current research was appropriate to assess this hypothesis. Regression results demonstrated that perceived social identity threat was a significant predictor of traditional gender role orientation ($b = 0.24, t(116) = 3.45, p < .001$), supporting Hypothesis 1 (Table III). In our analysis, age did not predict traditional gender role orientation ($b = 0.00, t(116) = 0.36, p = .721$) with perceived social identity threat accounting for 9.7% of the variation in traditional gender role orientation ($F(2, 117) = 6.29, p = .003$). Further analyses indicated that the effect size of this model was medium ($r(118) = .31$).

Hypothesis 2 predicted that traditional gender role orientation would mediate the relationship between perceived social identity threat and attitudes towards SPL (Figure 1). To test this hypothesis, we used the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2013; SPSS version 3.4). We used a bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 resamples to produce a 95% confidence interval around the estimated indirect effect. The bootstrapped indirect effect is significant if the bias-corrected 95% confidence interval (CI) excludes zero. An a priori power analysis using G*Power version 3.1.9.6 (Faul et al., 2009) indicated that the minimum sample size to achieve 0.80 power for detecting a medium effect with a significance criterion of $\alpha = .05$ was 36, suggesting that the sample size of 120 in the current research was appropriate to assess this hypothesis. PROCESS results showed that perceived social identity threat did not significantly predict attitudes towards SPL, $b = -0.03, 95\% \text{ CI} [-.15, .09]$. Perceived social identity threat did significantly predict traditional gender role orientation, $b = 0.24, 95\% \text{ CI} [.10, .38]$. Furthermore, traditional gender role orientation significantly predicted attitudes towards SPL, $b = -0.37, 95\% \text{ CI} [-.52, -.22]$. Finally, results showed that traditional gender role orientation mediated the relationship between perceived social identity threat and attitudes towards SPL (indirect effect: $b = -0.09, 95\% \text{ CI} [-.17, -.02]$), supporting Hypothesis 2. Together, the variables accounted for 31.2% of the variance in attitudes towards SPL, and further analyses indicated that the effect size of this
model was medium ($r(118) = .44$). When swapping the mediator and predictor variables, the mediation was non-significant.

Hypothesis 3 predicted that FSOP would moderate the relationship between perceived social identity threat and traditional gender role orientation (Figure 2). PROCESS version 3.4 was used, and Model One was selected (Hayes, 2018). Bootstrapping was performed at 5000 sample iterations. An a priori power analysis using G*Power version 3.1.9.6 (Faul et al., 2009) indicated that the minimum sample size to achieve 0.80 power for detecting a medium effect with a significance criterion of $\alpha = .05$ was 36, suggesting that the sample size of 120 in the current research was appropriate to assess this hypothesis. Results showed that perceived social identity threat did not significantly predict traditional gender role orientation, $b = 0.13$, 95% CI [-.00, .26]. However, FSOP did significantly predict traditional gender role orientation, $b = -0.52$, 95% CI [-.79, -.26].

Results demonstrated that when FSOP was low (-1SD), there was a significant relationship between perceived social identity threat and traditional gender role orientation, $b = 0.27$, 95% CI [.10, .45]. At the mean of FSOP, there was a non-significant relationship between perceived social identity threat and traditional gender role orientation, $b = 0.13$, 95% CI [-.00, .26]. When FSOP was high (+1SD), there was a non-significant relationship between perceived social identity threat and traditional gender role orientation, $b = -0.02$, 95% CI [-.18, .15]. The interaction between perceived social identity threat and traditional gender role orientation was significant, $b = -0.33$, 95% CI [-.57, -.09], indicating there was significant moderation. Further analyses indicated that the effect size of this model was large ($r(118) = .54$). Thus, Hypothesis 3 can be supported, suggesting that when FSOP is low, the positive relationship between perceived social identity threat and traditional gender role orientation is strengthened.
Hypothesis 4 predicted that FSOP would moderate the mediation between perceived social identity threat, traditional gender role orientation and SPL (Figure 3). The moderated mediation model was run in PROCESS to assess the significance of the indirect effects at different levels of the moderator (Hayes, 2013). Perceived social identity threat was the predictor, traditional gender role orientation was the mediator, attitudes towards SPL was the dependent variable, and FSOP was the moderator. An a priori power analysis using G*Power version 3.1.9.6 (Faul et al., 2009) indicated that the minimum sample size to achieve 0.80 power for detecting a medium effect with a significance criterion of \( \alpha = .05 \) was 41, suggesting that the sample size of 120 in the current research was appropriate to assess this hypothesis.

Results demonstrated that FSOP significantly moderated the relationship between perceived social identity threat and traditional gender role orientation, \( b = -.33 \), 95% CI [-.57, -.09]. However, using the index of moderated mediation, the overall moderated mediation was not supported, \( b = .12 \), 95% CI [-.05, .25]. The conditional indirect effect was non-significant at all levels of the moderator, indicating that there was no significant moderating effect of FSOP on perceived social identity threat on the indirect effect via traditional gender role orientation. Thus, Hypothesis 4 was not supported.

**Discussion**

We investigated the extent to which work (family supportive organisation perceptions [FSOP]) and gender-related factors (perceived social identity threat and traditional gender role orientation) influenced employed, UK-based men’s attitudes towards SPL. Consistent with our predictions, results showed that perceived social identity threat was positively associated with traditional gender role orientation. Traditional gender role orientation, in turn, was the mechanism through which perceived social identity threat affected attitudes towards SPL. FSOP moderated the relationship between perceived social identity threat and gender role
orientation, such that when FSOP was low the relationship was strengthened; however, there was no conditional direct effect in the moderated mediation. Overall, our findings indicate that work and gender-related factors are strongly associated with employed men’s attitudes towards SPL.

**Theoretical Contributions**

To our knowledge, ours is the first quantitative study in the UK context to assess the role of work and gender-related factors in men’s attitudes towards SPL. Our findings enrich understanding of employed men’s attitudes towards SPL in several ways. First, the positive association between perceived social identity threat and traditional gender role orientation indicates that men who experienced high perceived social identity threat are more likely to believe that women should work primarily in the home. This finding is strengthened, in turn, by the negative association between perceived social identity threat and attitudes towards SPL, corroborating research reporting that men can perceive the integration of women in work settings as threatening (Scheepers et al., 2009). This is further supported by the finding that traditional gender role orientation mediated the relationship between perceived social identity threat and attitudes towards SPL. This finding indicates that men with higher perceived social identity threat dislike SPL as it engenders the equal participation of women in the workplace, reducing traditional divisions of labour and consequently threatening men’s dominant position in society.

Second, we observed that FSOP moderated the relationship between perceived social identity threat and gender role orientation, such that when FSOP is low the relationship was strengthened. This finding emphasises that a lack of strategies to improve FSOP could increase male employees’ support for traditional divisions of labour by providing positive reinforcements of traditional gender roles. As moderation was significant only at low levels of
FSOP, we conclude that overtly high levels of workplace support for those with familial obligations may not be effective in reducing fears of backlash following gender role violation (e.g., utilising SPL), or changing gendered expectations of behaviour within the organisation in the longer-term. Rather, this finding suggests that the key is to avoid low levels of familial support, which perpetuate traditional gender roles and increase perceived social identity threat. Previous research has obtained similar results, noting that the perceived supportiveness of workplace culture impedes SPL and paternity leave use (e.g., Birkett & Forbes, 2019; Kaufman, 2018). This may be explained in part by the attraction-selection-attrition model, whereby men with strong traditional gender role orientation seek out and stay in workplaces that are low in familial support (De Cooman et al., 2009). Notably, as FSOP measures one’s perception of their organisation’s culture regarding family support, this finding indicates that regardless of actual policy implementation, employers must clearly demonstrate their commitment to supporting SPL users.

We did not find support for our prediction that the indirect effect of perceived social identity threat on attitudes towards SPL, via gender role orientation, would be moderated by the effects of FSOP. It may well be that strategies to improve FSOP alone will not necessarily raise perceived support for SPL among male colleagues with high perceived social identity threat and traditional gender role orientation. This stands in contrast to prior literature that has recommended policy actions to help organisations increase SPL uptake, which may in fact be limited in their effectiveness to inspire individual level change (Atkinson, 2017). We may speculate that the quality of family-friendly policies, and in particular their perceived relevance to male employees, could also play a role here. Historically, policies such as flexible working are expected to be used by women to enable them to accommodate family demands and continue their participation in the labour market (Chung & van der Horst, 2018). Men may employ these policies for very different purposes; for example, research shows that when
provided with work schedule control, full time working fathers tend to increase their working hours whereas full time working mothers do not (Chung & van der Horst, 2020). Men’s attitudes toward FSOP may also be more negative; pre-pandemic data show that men are more likely than women to report experiencing negative outcomes due to colleagues using flexible work arrangements for care purposes (Chung, 2020). This suggests that strategies to improve FSOP should include methods to engage and support male employees. Further research is needed to clarify this finding.

Finally, we found that men with stronger traditional gender role orientation did not only hold negative views of this policy, but also unfavourably judged men who used it. This result gives impetus to men’s fears that, in certain work contexts, they will face repercussions for utilising extended parental leave (e.g., Kaufman, 2018). Furthermore, since our research measured the attitudes of both parents and non-parents, we suggest that men who utilise SPL are likely to face negative judgements from fathers and non-fathers alike. This is an important addition to our understanding, indicating that attitudes towards SPL in non-parents may indeed permeate across organisations, playing an important role in eligible men’s uptake through the impact on wider organisational support for SPL.

Limitations and Future Directions

Due to the exploratory nature of this study, some limitations exist. First, due to the small and nonprobability convenience sample, caution must be exercised when considering the applicability of results to the wider population. It is unlikely that the sample captured a statistically balanced selection of adult men in the UK, and it is therefore possible that these findings would not be replicated in contexts or participants with characteristics not addressed by this research. Nonetheless, these explorative findings suggest the existence of these phenomena and provide a valuable basis for focussed future study in this area. Second, as this
study utilised self-report measures, results were susceptible to common-method variance. Items pertaining to sensitive topics (e.g., “a wife with a family has no time for outside employment”) may have been affected by social desirability effects. Although the self-reflective nature of the constructs measured rendered them ideal for self-report assessment, future studies might overcome this limitation by adopting a multimethod approach. Third, due to the use of cross-sectional methodology, causation could not be determined in the hypothesised relationships. Notably, it was outside the scope of this research to ascertain whether the variable of attitudes towards SPL affects long-term uptake of the policy. Longitudinal research, which separates exogenous and endogenous variables, is necessary to determine causation in this study’s hypothesised relationships. This will shed light on whether the construct of attitudes towards SPL predicts long-term uptake of the policy.

Finally, this study captured attitudes towards SPL during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has created a historical shift into a new era of work. Further research is needed to capture the lasting effects of COVID-19 on men’s attitudes towards SPL. For example, long-term hybrid or remote working patterns may promote a more gender-equal division of caring responsibilities among UK parents (Adamson et al., 2023), leading to improved attitudes towards SPL in fathers. Alternatively, closures of nurseries and schools may have pushed many mothers back into a primary caregiver role (Hupkau & Petrongolo, 2020), reducing their ability to participate equally in the workplace and reverting many families back to the traditional male breadwinner model (Mize et al., 2021; Reichelt et al., 2021).

**Practical Implications**

The bulk of SPL research has focussed heavily on implications for policy makers, overlooking recommendations for organisations on how to improve take-up of the current policy. Findings
from the present study suggest a number of practical implications which may help organisations improve male employees’ attitudes towards SPL.

In the first instance, human resource professionals should work with organisations to highlight the benefits of improved attitudes towards SPL. For example, higher employee support for SPL is likely to increase uptake of the policy, improving women’s participation in the workplace and aiding organisations in the reduction of their gender pay gap (Norman & Fagan, 2017). As companies of over 250 employees are required to submit annual public reports of their gender pay gap figures (GOV.UK, 2023a), improvements pertaining to this should also benefit these organisations via reputation enhancement. Organisations should also be encouraged to begin collecting their own data on parental leave use, as despite media and policy interest in SPL, the UK government does not regularly collect data pertaining to leave utilisation (Twamley & Schober, 2019). Thus, by tracking their own progress, organisations can identify their own trends and areas for improvement, alongside aiding nationwide efforts to improve SPL uptake by providing up-to-date data.

Subsequently, organisations should look to devise interventions which target the factors identified in the present research, with the aim to improve attitudes towards SPL in male employees. By raising support for the policy among all men across organisations, eligible fathers may be more likely to utilise SPL due to the perceived attitudinal change among their peers and reduced fear of backlash following gender role violation.

Given that the present research found that men with stronger traditional gender role orientation have less favourable attitudes towards men who use SPL, organisations could look to implement change management strategies which facilitate a culture shift towards greater acceptance of egalitarian ideologies, clearly delineating the benefits of male parental leave use. This could include publicising case studies of positive individual experiences with SPL, which may be especially effective if involving high-profile or successful personalities (Koslowski &
In line with these research findings, it may be further proposed that industries which foster traditionally male ideologies will face greater challenges in improving attitudes towards SPL (for example, organisations in STEM; Government Equalities Office, 2019), and thus may benefit from early adoption of these practices and interventions. Indeed, this may rely more heavily upon targeted sessions to address deep-rooted feelings of perceived social identity threat and traditional gender role orientation, as simply introducing organisational policy regarding familial support may not be effective in improving attitudes towards SPL. Accordingly, people professionals should also look to identify and engage with employees who report very high traditional gender role orientation and perceived social identity threat, providing them with targeted coaching sessions to address any specific concerns, further facilitating the culture shift. As this research also measured the opinions of non-parents, it may be further deduced that such interventions could also improve attitudes towards SPL for future users of the policy, inspiring change in the critical years before the decision is made.

In combination with the above strategies, organisations with low levels of FSOP could look to implement initiatives to demonstrate they are not anti-family, to reduce the strength of the relationship between perceived social identity threat and traditional gender role orientation; for example, by allocating ‘family champions’ within appropriate sections of their business who are responsible for family policy education and support in their department. This could be bolstered by support and provisions tailored for men in particular. Organisations may also introduce measures to ensure parents do not face discrimination for utilising family policies, especially the controversial SPL. This may include the introduction of anonymous complaints procedures for parents pertaining to this issue, and the implementation of disciplinary measures for individuals creating a hostile work environment in response to leave use. Indeed, research has reported that when the costs of leave use are high, men are likely to use less of their
entitlements (Bygren & Duvander, 2006). Ultimately, by implementing strategies which slow the spread of overt and covert negative judgements towards men using SPL, organisations can reduce the social stigma associated with men’s use of the policy and consequently improve male employees’ attitudes towards SPL. Future experiments should look to research the effectiveness of such interventions to enrich our understanding of practice implications in men’s attitudes towards SPL.
References


MEN’S ATTITUDES TOWARDS SHARED PARENTAL LEAVE


Twamley, K. (2021). “She has mellowed me into the idea of SPL”: Unpacking relational resources in UK couples’ discussions of Shared Parental Leave take-up. *Families, Relationships and Societies, 10*(1), 67-82.


Declarations

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Disclosure statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Ethical approval

Full ethical approval for the study was obtained prior to its commencement at the first author’s institution.
Table 1 Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Sub-category</th>
<th>Frequency (n)</th>
<th>Percent (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Marital status</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>60.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unmarried and living with partner</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>14.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unmarried</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>25.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>65.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>34.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual orientation</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>97.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Homosexual</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socioeconomic class</td>
<td>Upper class</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>77.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Working Class</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>17.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prefer Not to Say</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>White British</td>
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<td>90.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Irish</td>
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<td>0.8</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>European</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Any Other White Background</td>
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<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mixed White and Asian</td>
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<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest educational qualification</td>
<td>Doctoral degree</td>
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<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>University postgraduate programme</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>32.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>University undergraduate programme</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>39.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A-Levels or equivalent</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>15.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>GCSEs or equivalent</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>11.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manager</td>
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<td>42</td>
<td>35.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>65.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual income</td>
<td>&gt;£150,001</td>
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<td>11.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>£50,001 - £150,000</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>49.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>£12,501 - £50,000</td>
<td>40</td>
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<td>&lt;£12,501</td>
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<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prefer Not to Say</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment</td>
<td>Full Time</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>99.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Part Time</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2 Means, Standard Deviations, Correlations and Cronbach’s Alphas for All Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Attitudes Towards SPL</td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>(.80)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. FSOP</td>
<td>3.82</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>.30***</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Perceived Social Identity Threat</td>
<td>2.41</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>--17</td>
<td>-.37***</td>
<td>.78</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Traditional Gender Role Orientation</td>
<td>1.55</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>--44***</td>
<td>-.48***</td>
<td>.31***</td>
<td>.86</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Age</td>
<td>42.51</td>
<td>12.22</td>
<td>--03</td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. N = 120; *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001. Reliabilities in parentheses.
Table 3 Summary of Regression Analysis for Perceived Social Identity Threat as a Predictor of Traditional Gender Role Orientation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>b</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>$R^2$</th>
<th>Adjusted $R^2$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>.097</td>
<td>.082</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Social Identity Threat</td>
<td>0.24***</td>
<td>3.45</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. $N = 120$; *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$. 
Figure 1 The Relationship Between Perceived Social Identity Threat and Attitudes Towards SPL as Mediated by Traditional Gender Role Orientation

\[ b = 0.24^{***} \]

\[ b = -0.37^{***} \]

Direct Effect: \( b = -0.03, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.15, .09] \)
Indirect Effect: \( b = -0.09, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.17, -.02] \)
Figure 2 The Interaction Between Perceived Social Identity Threat and Traditional Gender Role Orientation
**Figure 3** The Moderating Effect of FSOP on the Mediation of Perceived Social Identity threat, Traditional Gender Role Orientation, and SPL

Direct Effect: $b = -0.03$, 95% CI [-.15, .09]
Indirect Effect (Index of Moderated Mediation): $b = 0.12$, 95% CI [-.05, .25]