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SYNOPSIS

Objective. This study extends current knowledge on coparenting, that is how parents work as a parenting team, by comparing patterns of prospective coparenting (i.e. expectations and worries related to forthcoming coparenting) among expectant parents in three countries varying in their sociocultural contexts. ***Design.*** During the third trimester of pregnancy, 30 Finnish, Japanese, and Portuguese heterosexual couples ($N = 180$) expecting their first child participated in individual semi-structured interviews on their prospective coparenting. A structured coding frame was developed in an iterative process between and within country teams. ***Results.*** Both country-general and country-specific patterns in prospective coparenting among Finnish, Japanese and Portuguese expectant couples emerged. Five themes of prospective coparenting across the three countries were identified, providing support for coparenting as a multidimensional construct but also revising knowledge on the relevance of these dimensions among expectant parents. Sociocultural context was reflected in couples' expectations about the division of parenting responsibilities and in their expectations related to mutual support and agreement on childrearing. Country differences were also identified in how the expectant parents justified their decisions and saw the relative primacy of mothers and fathers in forthcoming coparenting. ***Conclusions.*** Parental cooperation in terms of mutual support, team spirit, sharing, and agreeing on childrearing were recognized among prospective parents in the three countries. However, the availability of institutional support, gender and the care regime, and the associated set of values as well as existing work and parenting cultures shaped expectant parents' future visions of their coparenting.

INTRODUCTION

Coparenting, denoting shared parenting responsibilities and mutual support between caregivers (Feinberg, 2003; McHale & Sirotkin, 2019), is an important and globally highly valued resource for families (Kekkonen et al., 2023). Coparenting forms and structures, underlying sets of values and beliefs, drivers, and barriers to parental cooperation may, however, differ across countries (Bornstein et al., 2011; Feinberg, 2003) and impact concrete

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arrangements and day-to-day coparenting practices. Despite the increasing research interest in coparenting across countries, such as New Zealand (Hohmann-Marriott & McMath, 2012), China (Li & Liu, 2020), Mexican American families (Barnett et al., 2016) and Finland (Ranta et al., 2023), cross-national comparisons in coparenting remain scarce. Researchers (e.g., Bornstein, 2012; Tissot et al., 2019, 2024) agree that, due to the strong link between sociocultural context and coparenting, studying coparenting cross-nationally is highly relevant. For example, cross-national comparisons can yield insight into the various dimensions and models of coparenting and whether they are recognizable across countries (Tissot et al., 2019, 2024). In this qualitative, cross-national study, we extend current knowledge on the cultural embeddedness of coparenting by comparing patterns of prospective coparenting, that is expectations and worries relating to coparenting, among expectant parents in three countries: Finland, Japan, and Portugal. It is important to study prospective coparenting, as prenatal meanings and expectations may lay a foundation for parental decisions and experiences, particularly among first-time parents (Powell & Karraker, 2019). The present three countries vary in their family policies, parenting and work cultures, and service provision, as well as ideals of parental gender roles, thus offering diverse sociocultural contexts for expectant parents' future visions of coparenting (Grunow & Evertsson, 2019). Understanding patterns, meanings, and barriers of prospective coparenting can help services and policy makers better support the construction of coparenting.

Prospective Coparenting

Prospective coparenting denotes expectant couples' expectations about their forthcoming cooperation as parents. Pregnancy is an important time for the development of coparenting, as it is time when expectant couples start to imagine and construct their future caregiving roles with each other. McHale and Rotman (2007) and Ranta et al. (2023, 2024) in their studies of first-time expectant couples in the United States and Finland, respectively, noted the importance of the early representations of co-parenting. Prenatal parenting expectations tend to be very positive or even unrealistic (Sanders et al., 2023). The same trend in coparenting expectations (Lindroos et al., 2023), especially in relation to the division of care responsibilities after childbirth, have been indicated by studies conducted in the United States (Biehle & Mickelson, 2012) and Finland (Sevón, 2012).

Powell and Karraker (2019), who studied expectant mothers in the United States, suggested that, although caregiving habits are mostly formed during the postnatal period, the division of labor has already been socialized during pregnancy or even earlier. Alakärppä et al. (2022) found that young Finnish women tended to ponder future care and

parenting issues before becoming pregnant. Such caregiving habits and expectations are linked to individuals' cultural upbringing as well as their attitudes and beliefs (Kushner et al., 2014; Sayer & Gornick, 2012) and may further become internalized through witnessing others' division of labor in media and among peers and relatives. Thus, expectant parents initiate the reproduction of sociocultural values and norms before their baby is born (Kushner et al., 2014). Once formed, such habits and expectations tend to persist and are not easy to change.

Researchers have defined coparenting in several ways and seen it to be composed of distinct components (see Hock & Mooradian, 2013). What is shared among these conceptualizations is interested in parental harmony, boundary preservation, reciprocal caregiving, and parental connection. Feinberg (2003) conceptualized coparenting as a multi-dimensional construct including the division of labor (division of childcare and parenting responsibilities), support versus undermining (acknowledging the other parent's contribution vs. criticism), agreement on childrearing topics (moral values and educational standards), and joint family management (interactional patterns). Feinberg and Kan (2008) later identified a dimension called closeness, referring for example, to a couple's sense of belonging to each other. We chose Feinberg's model as the theoretical basis for studying prospective coparenting, as it has been widely used in research on the transition to parenthood. Feinberg's dimensions of coparenting have been identified among Finnish expectant couples (Ranta et al., 2023) and among Portuguese expectant fathers (Pinto & Figueiredo, 2019). The Coparenting Relationship Measure (CRS; Feinberg et al., 2012) based on Feinberg's model has been tested in a cross-national study of 10 countries (including Japan and Portugal) by Tissot et al. (2024).

Table 1 Sociocultural factors relevant for coparenting.

	Finland "Nordic Universal Welfare State"	Japan "Conservative Familistic Regime"	Portugal "Micro Solidarity"
Gender and care regime	Dual earner-dual carer	Hybrid model	Dual earner-dual carer
Institutional support for coparenting	Parental leave, home care allowance, public childcare, equal family benefits	Extensive leaves and services, but gendered caring roles	Short family leaves, restricted state provided childcare
Prevailing work and parenting cultures	Support for gender equality in working life and parenting, intensive mothering culture	Gendered polarization of work and heavy work culture, intensive mothering culture	Support for gender equality in working life and parenting, intensive mothering culture
Individualism value (Hofstede et al., 2010; scale: 0 = most collectivist, 100 = most individualist)	63 (individualist)	46	27 (collectivist)

Cultural Embeddedness of Prospective Coparenting: Four Interlinked Factors

Four interlinked factors are of special relevance in the construction of coparenting during the transition to parenthood (see Table 1). The first factor is the country's gender and care regime and the associated set of values underlying the roles of the mother and father. What kinds of gender role models are supported and encouraged clearly shape how couples plan and realize parenthood (Grunow & Evertsson, 2019). According to Favez et al. (2023), who studied Swiss parents, an egalitarian shift in gender roles implies that responsibilities must be negotiated between parents. The second factor is the availability of institutional support for parenting and childcare in terms of parental leave, childcare services, and the father's right participation in childrearing (Kekkonen et al., 2023). According to Grunow and Evertsson (2019), parents' possibilities for shared parenting are tied to work-family policies, especially rights related to maternity, paternity, and parental leave. The third important factor is the prevailing work and parenting and work cultures as these define how much encouragement mothers and fathers are given to invest in parenting and work (e.g., Egami, 2020; Raudasoja et al., 2022). Fourth, coparenting is shaped by the extent to which a country adheres to individualist vs collectivist values, as this distinction influences, for example, whether individual goals or the well-being the whole family are prioritized (e.g., Hofstede et al., 2010).

Finland, Japan, and Portugal were selected for this study, as they clearly differ across the above-mentioned four factors (see Table 1). Finland shares characteristics of the Nordic universal welfare state, which is based on state responsibility for service provision (Esping-Andersen, 1999) and the primacy of the dual-earner/dual-carer model (Grunow & Evertsson, 2021). Finland offers strong institutional support for coparenting via parental leave, a home-care allowance for parents of young children, and high-quality early childhood education and care (Salmi & Närvi, 2017). A family policy reform, which started in August 2022, guarantees equal benefits for both parents and the flexible sharing of family leave (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2022). Despite the strong emphasis on gender equality in work and parenting, the perception of the mother as the primary caregiver and a culture of intensive motherhood remains strong (Raudasoja et al., 2022). Of the three countries, Finland is highest in the level of individualist versus collectivist values with a score of 63/100 (Hofstede et al., 2010). In individualist countries, other caregiving adults are only loosely connected to the parental team, and the life planning of a parental couple is often autonomous from kinship obligations. Negotiation between parents on care responsibilities is common, as the couple's decisions may be based on individual goals rather than on traditions and family values.

Japan exemplifies a conservative familistic regime (Esping-Andersen, 1999) based on a work-care framework (Grunow & Evertsson, 2019) and

a gendered polarization of work, where women either work part-time or are stay-at-home mothers (Piotrowski et al., 2015). According to An and Peng (2016), Japan represents a hybrid gender-care model, as it provides both extensive leave provisions for childcare at home and extensive public childcare services to promote equal labor market participation. The former strengthens gendered caring roles, as women mainly take up family leave, while access to childcare services promotes a degendered caring division. The Japanese work-life culture, in turn, with long full-time working hours (Ono, 2018) discourages women from full participation in the labor force. Long working hours and other cultural traditions also mean that men participate less than women in childcare and housework. Furthermore, intensive parenting attitudes are prevalent among Japanese women (Egami, 2020). Of the three countries, Japan, scoring 46/100 in individualism, falls between Finland and Portugal in the level of individualist versus collectivist values (Hofstede et al., 2010). According to Ogihara (2017), greater individualism is trending, despite the simultaneous persistence of collectivism. Collectivist values in the Japanese context can also imply an employment system that is based on Confucian principles of obligations from the more privileged in society to the less privileged (Block et al., 2013).

Portugal had been cited as an example of Southern European "micro solidarity" (Ferrera, 2005) characterized by strong familism and a gendered labor market (Saraceno, 1997). It can, however, also be categorized as a dual-earner/dual-carer model. In Portugal women work full time; however, due to short family leave and low wages, they return to work soon after giving birth. Availability of state-provided childcare in Portugal has traditionally been restricted, but a policy of free childcare for families with children born after September 2021 came into force in 2023. Gender equality has been strongly promoted in the context of European integration policies, particularly in the work environment from the 2000s onwards (Marques et al., 2021). However, cultural expectations surrounding motherhood and family caregiving remain largely shaped by traditional gender norms that attribute a central and often irreplaceable role to mothers in childcare. Consequently, women continue to bear a disproportionate share of unpaid work and are predominantly expected to assume responsibility for reconciling work and family demands (Matias, 2019; Wall et al., 2010). Of the three countries, Portugal is lowest in the level of individualist versus collectivist values with a score of 27/100 (Hofstede et al., 2010). In collectivist countries, mutual support, solidarity, and the sharing of care between family members are highly valued. Furthermore, other adults are often involved in caregiving, and parents tend to explain and end up making their decisions based on family values rather than negotiations between the couple (Quek & Knudson-Martin, 2006)

The Current Study

This study extends current knowledge on coparenting by comparing patterns of prospective coparenting (i.e., expectations and worries related to forthcoming coparenting) among expectant parents in three countries—Finland, Japan, and Portugal—varying in their sociocultural contexts for constructing coparenting (see Table 1). A qualitative cross-national design can reveal similarities and differences in such patterns. The research questions were as follows: First, what kinds of expectations do parents-to-be in Finland, Japan, and Portugal have about their prospective coparenting? What kinds of patterns (e.g., dimensions) in prospective coparenting can be found? Second, to what extent are these patterns similar and different across the three countries?

Given the relevance of coparenting for new parents globally (Kekkonen et al., 2023), we hypothesized that parents-to-be in the three countries would wish for positive coparenting in terms of collaboration and mutual support. Due to differences in countries' sociocultural contexts (see Table 1) we expected to find differences especially in how participants plan to divide their parenting tasks and responsibilities either equally or in more traditional gender-specific ways (e.g., Grunow & Evertsson, 2019). Given different degrees in their adherence to individualist versus collectivist values in the three countries, country differences in the meanings attributed to mutual support and cooperation were also expected. We expected that mutual support and cooperation would be mentioned less often among Finnish expectant couples compared to the others, especially Portuguese expectant parents (e.g., Sumari et al., 2020). Furthermore, as there are widespread ongoing changes in values and institutions with respect to parenting, childcare and gender roles (see Nagase & Holloway, 2022) we expected to identify cross-national overlap in the construction of coparenting across countries. A qualitative design well suits such aims.

METHOD

Recruitment of Participants and Selection of Country Samples

Participants were recruited from urban areas in the three countries through several channels: maternity clinics, family education classes, and social media. Forty-six Finnish, forty-four Japanese and forty-eight Portuguese expectant couples living in heterosexual relationships participated in individual interviews. In the online questionnaire, background information was also collected. The inclusion criteria included that couples ought to (1) live in an urban neighborhood; (2) understand the language of the interview; and (3) participate in both the survey and interview. To ensure comparable cross-national interview data, 30 couples per country were selected from the total sample. In so selecting, we endeavored to make the sample

Table 2 Participants' sociodemographic information.

	Finland		Japan		Portugal	
	Expectant Mothers ($n = 30$)	Expectant Fathers ($n = 30$)	Expectant Mothers ($n = 30$)	Expectant Fathers ($n = 30$)	Expectant Mothers ($n = 30$)	Expectant Fathers ($n = 30$)
Age (%)						
Below 28	26.7	20.0	3.3	10.0	23.3	13.8
28–32	40.0	40.0	40.0	33.3	50.0	62.1
Above 32	33.3	40.0	56.7	56.7	26.7	24.1
Education (%)						
Less than upper secondary	0	6.7	3.3	6.7	0	6.7
Upper secondary	13.3	20.0	20.0	16.7	20.0	40.0
Lower tertiary	23.3	36.7	56.7	53.3	46.7	30.0
Upper tertiary or more	63.3	36.7	20.0	23.3	33.3	23.3
Financial situation (%)						
Very Poor	0	0	0	0	0	3.4
Poor	13.3	16.7	16.7	10.0	20.7	17.2
About average	26.7	16.7	20.0	10.0	62.1	48.3
Comfortable	50.0	50.0	50.0	63.3	13.8	31.0
Well-off	10.0	16.7	13.3	16.7	3.4	0
	Finnish Expectant Couples ($n = 30$)		Japanese Expectant Couples ($n = 30$)		Portuguese Expectant Couples ($n = 30$)	
Married (%)	63.3		100.0		53.3	
Length of the couple relationship (years)	6.93		4.87		6.61	

Note. Underlined cells have adjusted standardized residuals $\geq |2|$ when comparing within genders (other variables) or within couples (marital status).

characteristics as similar as possible to each country's respective sociodemographic characteristics (see Robinson, 2014) in age, educational level, work status before maternity leave, and working part-time/full-time. A more detailed description of participants by country is presented in Table 2. The participants' background variables, especially those of mothers, differed across the three countries. In age, Japanese expectant mothers were under-represented in the youngest age category and over-represented in the oldest category (Fisher-Freeman-Halton exact test: $p = .035$). In education, differences were found between the Japanese and Finnish expectant mothers, the Japanese mothers being underrepresented and Finnish mothers overrepresented in the highest education category and the opposite in the lower tertiary education category (Fisher-Freeman-Halton exact test: $p = .015$).

Both the expectant mothers (Fisher-Freeman-Halton exact test: $p = .005$) and fathers (Fisher-Freeman-Halton exact test: $p = .003$) also differed in their self-reported financial situation. For example, in the case of the Japanese and Portuguese expectant parents, Portuguese parents were underrepresented in the more favorable financial categories. In civil status (Fisher-Freeman-Halton exact test: $p < .001$), Japanese expectant parents were overrepresented in marriage and Portuguese parents underrepresented. The participants did not differ across countries in the length of their relationship with their partner.

Semi-Structured Interview About Prospective Coparenting

The interview protocol and questions were prepared collaboratively among the country teams to guarantee a shared understanding of the meaning of the questions. To ensure similar protocols and practices in conducting the interviews, an interview guide including data recruitment rules and interview practices was prepared. When doing research cross-nationally, such arrangements must be made with due sensitivity to national conditions and values (Chapple & Ziebland, 2018). Special effort was made to formulate the interview questions in a way that respected the cultural diversity and significance of the topic. The guide also dealt with the theoretical basis of coparenting, research ethics, and practices relating to the transcription and pseudonymization (e.g., replacing direct identifiers with pseudonyms) of the data.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the expectant parents in late pregnancy (1–3 months before the due date) by the researchers and PhD and master's students trained in using the interview guide. Expectant parents were interviewed individually to allow each couple member to share their experience from their own perspective without feeling constrained by their partner's reactions (Cerchiaro, 2023). The interview questions were as follows: "What would you hope your cooperation as parents will be like when the baby is born?"; "Have you and your partner discussed your wishes related to your cooperation as parents?"; and "If so, what are they and how do you think they might be fulfilled? These key questions were complemented, if needed, with some sub-questions such as "Will you and your partner do the same or different kinds of things with your baby, such as taking care of the baby, playing with the baby?" "What kind of emotional and practical support for your parenthood do you expect to get from your partner?" "When the child grows up, do you expect you and your partner to share the same or have different views about raising children?"

Thematic Analysis of Cross-National Data and Structured Coding

Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and pseudonymized. To respond to the first research question on patterns of prospective coparenting, we conducted a thematic analysis. As recommended (e.g., Fedi et al., 2019; Haak et al., 2013), we conducted the analyses in the native language to minimize losing nuances of the interview data in translations. Our approach to thematic analysis combines elements of coding reliability thematic analysis (having clear coding instructions, aiming at intercoder agreement within the country team) and codebook thematic analysis (each country-team coding their own data, collaborating within and between country teams as an iterative process, discussing the meanings

of categories, aiming at coding agreement between country teams) (Braun & Clarke, 2022, pp. 6–7). Such an approach was justified as a structural coding approach works well when the data are to be analyzed by multiple researchers in different languages (e.g., Chapple & Ziebland, 2018). The data-driven and theory-guided analysis focused on the content of the issues the participants talked about in relation to their forthcoming coparenting.

To be sensitive to cultural context, we conducted the analysis as an iterative process in collaboration within and between the country teams (see, e.g., Chapple & Ziebland, 2018; Fedi et al., 2019). Members of each country team first familiarized themselves with the interviews of five couples and then discussed the scope of the analysis together. The Finnish team created a preliminary version of the coding frame based on interviews of 10 couples. The other country teams made suggestions on modifications to the (sub-)themes based on their own data. Then, a new version of the coding frame was prepared, and the analysis proceeded in several rounds during which the data to be analyzed were increased to 20 interviews per country. At this point agreement on the initial sub-themes and themes was reached. In each country team, two to four researchers took part in creating this preliminary coding frame.

Next, to ensure that instructions for coding the (sub-)themes were understandable and to strengthen the reliability of the analysis in each country, two coders independently coded the interviews of five couples (see Braun & Clarke, 2022). Intercoder agreement was used as a tool in defining the coding frame and identifying the least clear aspects of the coding, thereby contributing to the development of robust and reliable coding instructions (see Halpin, 2024). In the first round of coding, when data of 10 couples were coded, the percentage of intercoder agreement fell between 80% and 100% across all countries and sub-themes in 85% of the cases. There were some sub-themes in which the intercoder agreement was lower, such as "Equality in workloads" and "Both parents involved with the child." Mismatched codings were identified and discussed by the coders in each country team, and instructions for the coders were refined. The final coding frame is given in Appendix. After Inter Coder Reliability (ICR) testing, codings of the 10 couples per country were checked according to the refined instructions (and if needed, recoded) and the remaining data were coded by the original coder.

Finally, to illustrate similarities and differences between countries, responding to the second research question, the prevalences of the themes were calculated and compared. Table 3 shows the proportions of participants who mentioned each (sub-)theme at least once during their interviews by country and gender and in the whole data set.

RESULTS

Patterns of Prospective Coparenting: Five Themes and Their Justifications

The aims of this cross-national study were to identify patterns (e.g., dimensions) of coparenting expectations (Research question 1) and to document country similarities versus differences in such patterns (Research question 2). The thematic analysis resulted in five themes describing the dimensions of prospective coparenting which, to varying degrees, emerged from the data in all three countries (see Table 3). These were "sharing of responsibilities," "mutual support," "agreeing on childrearing," "weness versus individual time," and "involvement of both parents or one parent." The theme "weness," which encompassed the feeling of wanting to be a team, doing parenthood together, and deciding on child-related and learning issues together, was a strong expectation in all countries. The fifth theme found in all three countries described the expectation of both parents (or one parent) being involved and having a good relationship with the child. In talking about their future decision-making, participants also tended to explain and justify their expectations, especially those relating to sharing responsibilities and agreeing

Table 3 Prevalence of themes and subthemes, proportions of participants who mention the (sub) theme.

Themes and Subthemes	Finnish Expectant Parents ($n = 60$) %	Japanese Expectant Parents ($n = 60$) %	Portuguese Expectant Parents ($n = 60$) %	Expectant Mothers ($n = 90$) %	Expectant Fathers ($n = 90$) %	All (N=180) %
Sharing responsibilities	100	93	90	94	94	94
Equality in workloads	65	30	63	51	54	52
Primacy of mother	66	56	43	57	53	55
Primacy of father	5	23	6	14	8	11
Sharing based on abilities	36	50	13	32	34	33
Support	95	46	93	87	68	78
Emotional support	83	35	83	78	55	67
Practical and financial support	88	25	51	60	45	55
Agreeing/negotiating on childrearing	58	90	88	76	81	78
Finding agreement	58	63	85	66	71	68
Disagreement	20	31	23	23	26	25
Primacy of mother	0	16	6	6	8	7
Primacy of father	0	6	0	2	2	2
Giving up	0	6	1	4	1	2
Weness versus individual time	58	53	41	53	48	51
Weness	51	45	40	46	44	45
Individual time	18	15	6	15	11	13
Involvement of parents in childcare and childrearing	38	26	30	34	28	31
Both involved	38	18	18	28	21	25
Forming individual relationship	1	11	15	7	11	9

on childrearing. These justifications typically mirrored gendered cultural ideals such as the primacy of the mother or father and were considered when constructing and naming the subthemes. In their justifications relating to the themes of weness and involvement, participants seemed to balance the roles of each family member, the couple or the whole family as a triad.

Sharing of Responsibilities

The theme of sharing of responsibilities was mentioned by the highest proportion of expectant parents in all three countries. The theme comprised four non-mutually exclusive subthemes based on variation in coparenting arrangements and parents' justifications: (1) expecting equality in workloads, (2) sharing based on the primacy of the mother as the main caregiver, (3) sharing based on the primacy of the father as earner, and (4) sharing based on each other's abilities.

Two-thirds (65%) of the Finnish and 63% of the Portuguese expectant parents expressed a strong wish for the equal sharing of responsibilities, as stated by a Finnish woman: "Equality in parenthood is really important for us." These answers often included a long list of duties and responsibilities and a plan for the equitable sharing of these between the partners:

> While one is making dinner, the other is taking care of the baby, and everything flows naturally. I don't think either of us will be particularly overloaded. (Portuguese woman)

Fewer than one-third (30%) of Japanese expectant parents expected equal workloads.

> As far as housework is concerned, yes, I want to make it as equal as possible. Well, equality is difficult to define . . . I think it would be good if we could spend our time as equals in child-rearing, housework, and everything else in our lives. (Japanese man)

However, it was almost as common to assume the primacy of the mother in childcare and parenting. Such a traditional division of responsibilities was expected by 67% of the Finnish, 57% of the Japanese, and 43% of the Portuguese participants. Many participants used terms such as "natural," "normal," or "easygoing" to describe their expected way of sharing household duties. Thus, in general the participants viewed the mother as being intrinsically more connected to the baby and more capable of performing care tasks, and hence implicitly the primary caregiver.

> Mothers tend to be . . . even a little bit more . . . how to put it? To not use an unkind word . . . But eventually even more possessive about this relationship with the baby, also because of breastfeeding, because of all these circumstances . . . Because socially it is also like that. Because culturally we were also brought up to do so. And all these experiences end up emerging in this experience. (Portuguese woman)

This differentiated division of duties was especially common among the Japanese parents, because they expected a more traditional division of labor between the mother and the father, which they justified by citing the primacy of the mother as caregiver and the primacy of the fathers' work situation:

> In any case, I have to work, so the amount of time I can be involved is very limited. (Japanese man)

Although 23% of the Japanese participants expected the father to be the prime earner, this expectation was stated by only a small proportion of the Finnish (5%) and Portuguese (7%) parents. Some Japanese expectant mothers simply accepted this situation.

> I assume he'll just go out and earn money, so I don't really expect it to be so strictly equal. I don't really expect much help from my husband. I just think it is okay as long as he is working. (Japanese woman)

Among the Finnish and Portuguese participants, expectations relating to sharing responsibilities were often ambivalent; that is, participants wished for equality between the couple but, at the same time, perceived the mother as the primary caregiver.

> We will make decisions related to the baby and our family equally, and take care of the baby equally, but of course in the first six months it will be largely up to the mother because I'll be working. (Finnish man)

Expectant parents in all three countries often justified the primacy of mothers by citing breast-feeding and the naturalness of a mother's connection with her baby.

Seeing the mother as the primary carer was sometimes expressed as a concern; despite aiming at equality, the mother will anyway assume the role of the main caregiver. There were also concerns about tiredness due to sleep deprivation and mothers' gatekeeping:

> One kind of small concern is how tired we will be . . . and uptight . . . and whether I'll be able to do things in my own way. (Finnish man)

It was also common, especially among the Japanese and Finnish expectant parents, to expect sharing responsibilities to be based on individual characteristics, such as personality traits, personal preferences, or strengths:

> He has been saying that he wants our child to play football or do martial arts from the moment our child becomes two years old, so I think I will leave such things to my husband, including these activities. (Japanese woman)

Emotional and Practical Support

The theme "support" was mentioned by most Finnish and Portuguese expectant parents and comprised three non-mutually exclusive subthemes denoting the form of mutual parenting support: (1) expecting emotional (talking, listening), (2) practical (helping, taking turns in childcare), and (3) financial support (earning money). Finnish (83%) and Portuguese (83%) expectant parents, especially women, wished for emotional support from their partners in terms of talking, listening, understanding, showing empathy, giving positive feedback and supporting the other in parenthood.

> When he goes back to work and I take the responsibility over our daily life and am faced with all kinds of things, I hope he will listen to my concerns and help me in handling all these issues and coping with tiredness and be interested in all the good things too (Finnish woman)

The Japanese data contained fewer references to support than the data in the other two countries. There were only a few statements indicative of seeking support for oneself, and more references were found about supporting one's partner. Only 35% of Japanese parents expected to get or receive support from their spouses and 25% to get practical or financial support.

> It makes me happy when my partner says things like "thank you" or "was it hard today?," or when we express our gratitude to each other. It makes me feel that he really understands me, that he is watching over me. So, I would like to hear such words from him. (Japanese woman)

Agreement on Childrearing

The theme "agreement on childrearing" mentioned by most of the participants dealt with childrearing issues, goals and values, and whether the couple agreed on them. It comprised four non-mutually exclusive subthemes denoting the outcome of the expectant parents' childrearing-related negotiations and how they arrived at this outcome: (1) expecting to find agreement, (2) expecting disagreement; and (3) perceiving the primacy of the mother or (4) of the father in childrearing issues, (5) giving up. Agreement on childrearing issues was less often mentioned by Finnish (58%) participants than those in the other two countries (Japanese: 90%, Portuguese: 88%).

Expectant parents in all three countries expected to find agreement in childrearing. Most often, partners hoped to be on the same page on big issues such as childrearing values or how to rear the child. Nevertheless, they expected to experience some minor conflicts. Most believed that should disagreements arise, they would be able to resolve them by talking to each other:

> We will have to talk about it between ourselves and try not to argue in front of her (child) and even if I do not agree about something, we will not discuss it in front of her. But it will be a challenge. It will be a challenge. (Portuguese woman)

Across the three countries, a considerable proportion of participants (Finnish: 20%, Japanese: 32%, Portuguese 23%) expected or expressed concern about disagreements that they believed could not be resolved by negotiating.

> I don't think our views would be reconcilable. Well, maybe it is just her personality, but she doesn't like children getting covered in mud or messing with things, maybe she is a bit fastidious, but she doesn't like it. So, she doesn't really want our child to play with things like boys do, even though we are expecting a boy (Japanese man)

It was typical among the Japanese expectant parents to expect that childrearing issues would be decided by just one parent, usually the mother possibly due to the Japanese work culture where fathers usually work long hours and have no time for discussions on childrearing. A Japanese woman reported she would turn to her relatives on child-rearing issues:

> I don't really think that I can raise a child on my own. I rely on my parents or, you know, I get or use services that I can pay for. I do not really expect much from my husband, I mean . . . I think I won't mind, and he can get on with his work.

When asked, "Do you ever talk about it together?" this Japanese woman replied, "We have never done that. But I tell him that I am going to do solo-parenting."

Weness versus Individual Time

The theme "weness" was mentioned by about half of the expectant parents (Finnish: 58%, Japanese: 53%, Portuguese: 42%). The theme comprised two subthemes underscoring the importance of either dyadic or individual time: (1) expecting weness or (2) time for oneself. These subthemes were not mutually exclusive, although it was rare for one person to mention both wishes. In the three countries combined, almost one-half (46%) of the expectant parents wished for strong weness, teamwork, and shared learning of coparenting. This dimension of coparenting included participants' wishes for working together as a team, having a strong team spirit, developing together, and coping with challenges together. The parents used several metaphors for weness such as "team-play" or a "double act." Some parents spoke about resilience when facing challenges:

> We are very confident that whatever comes will turn out well because we are very united and, if any challenge comes along, we will overcome it together. (Portuguese man)

A few participants (Finnish: 18%, Japanese: 15%, Portuguese: 7%) also mentioned their wishes and concerns about having time for themselves. For example, a Finnish expectant mother wished to have some time of her own and not be the only one feeding the baby, and another woman aimed to actively seek time for herself. A similar hope for having time to oneself was expressed by a Japanese woman:

> If I get out of the house, I can have some time to myself, can't I? I now think that is something I will need to do.

Involvement of Parents in Childcare and Childrearing

The theme of "involvement," mentioned by 32% of the expectant parents comprised two sub themes highlighting the importance of either the triadic or dyadic relationship: (1) hoping for the involvement of both parents or (2) for one's own involvement as a parent in childcare and childrearing. The response profiles in Finland differed somewhat from those in the other two countries: 38% of Finnish expectant parents hoped for the involvement of both parents and only 2% to form individual relationships with the child, but the two sub-themes were mentioned with almost equal frequency by both the Japanese and Portuguese expectant parents.

About 38% of the Finnish and 18% of the Portuguese and Japanese participants hoped that both parents would be able to form and maintain a good relationship with their baby. They justified the involvement of both parents in childrearing by citing the child's needs and the child's right to form a relationship with both the mother and father, and sometimes by citing both parents' right to be involved in childcare. The parents hoped for a situation where each could care for the baby and do all the caring tasks needed: "[I hope] that we both can do all those duties." (Finnish man)

Sometimes, one parent, usually the woman, hoped for their partner's involvement:

> I hope he takes an active role in taking care of the baby, so I don't have to be the one who says what to do and gives advice." (Finnish woman)

Expectant fathers often reported wanting to have an equally responsible role as a parent rather than someone who merely, for example, plays with the child or takes the child fishing. Expectant parents in general expressed the importance of equal involvement and underlined its benefits for the baby and themselves. They also mentioned the importance of both parents being part of the whole family.

> When the child is born and grows up, I will enjoy talking to her about different things. I will be able to enjoy the relationship between the three of us. (Japanese man)

The expectant father in the following excerpt saw the importance both of parents and child being together as a family and of themselves as a father-child dyad:

> It will be important to have moments with the three of us and with the two of us: father and child, mother and child. (Portuguese man)

DISCUSSION

This qualitative, cross-national study contributed to new understanding of patterns of prospective coparenting among Finnish, Japanese, and Portuguese expectant parents. The study revealed both country-general and country-specific patterns in prospective coparenting among parents-to-be in the three countries with different sociocultural contexts. As we hypothesized, parental cooperation in terms of team-working and agreeing on childrearing was important for expectant parents across the three countries. The sociocultural embeddedness of coparenting was, however, evident in couples' plans concerning concrete coparenting arrangements as we hypothesized. Our findings brought new understanding to how expectant mothers and fathers in the three countries justify their plans and the decisions they expected to reach—by negotiating or following traditional models. They also navigated between traditional and modern forms of coparenting, balanced among individual, couple, and family viewpoints to coparenting, and identified barriers such as a heavy working culture.

The analysis revealed five themes: dimensions of prospective coparenting, giving support for seeing coparenting as a multidimensional construct (e.g., Feinberg, 2003; Hock & Mooradian, 2013), and denoting the relevance and strength of parental cooperation for the expectant couples across the three countries. Of the various dimensions, sharing responsibilities, mutual support, and agreement on childrearing supported Feinberg's (2003) multidimensional model of coparenting as well as the dimensions of reciprocal caregiving and parental harmony suggested by Hock and Mooradian (2013). Our findings further refined the nature of these key dimensions for expectant parents, such as the different role of emotional support from the partner in the three countries.

The fourth theme of prospective coparenting—weness versus individual time—resembles the notions of parenting-based closeness (Feinberg & Kan, 2008), parental connection (Hock & Mooradian, 2013), or solidarity (McHale & Rotman, 2007), which have been characterized in earlier studies as the experience of working together as a team and developing as a parental couple. In this study, this dimension among the expectant parents was manifested by a wish for team spirit and a sense of cohesion and resilience when

encountering obstacles. Half of the expectant parents spoke about parenting as a joint process, where cooperation and acting with one voice are keys for the couple to deal with the challenges of parenthood. At the same time, some participants wanted time for themselves.

The fifth theme, pertaining to parental involvement with the child, highlighted expectant parents' wishes to be part of the life of the child and the importance of the child forming an individual relationship with each parent, thereby indicating that expectant parents both individually and as a couple were adjusting to the arrival of a child (Mangelsdorf et al., 2011). Almost four in ten Finnish expectant parents also emphasized a child's right to have two involved parents and both parents' right to be involved.

Sociocultural Context Shaping Prospective Coparenting

The findings showed that sociocultural context in terms of work and care regime, institutional support for coparenting, work and parenting cultures (see Table 1) as well as associated values relating to the roles of mother and father are reflected in informants' expectations about the division of parenting responsibilities (e.g., Grunow & Evertsson, 2019; Sayer & Gornick, 2012) and in their expectations relating to mutual support and agreement on childrearing issues. Differences were identified in how expectant parents justified their future-related decisions about sharing and agreeing on parental duties, how they expected to negotiate these issues, and how they saw the relative primacy of mothers and fathers in their future-related visions concerning childcare, parenting, and childrearing. The traditional ideal of the primacy of the mother was the most pronounced among the expectations of Japanese participants (as also found by Takeishi et al., 2019) while also clearly visible in the other two countries, if somewhat differently. In Japan, the primacy of mother was mostly mentioned as a concern and barrier to equality in sharing responsibilities, and the central role of the mother was often reported as a feature of family system for which there is no alternative. Japanese expectant fathers, having to spend long hours at work due to a heavy work culture, did not expect to spend much time with their newborn, nor did their wives expect such involvement from their husbands. In Finland and Portugal where full-time work is almost a maternal norm, along with a strongly present intensive motherhood culture, women expected that childcare and household tasks would be burdensome (e.g., Raudasoja et al., 2022).

On the issue of individualist versus collectivist values in the three countries, we found no clear links between these and coparenting expectations and justifications contrary to our expectations. In all three countries, many expectant parents discussed the importance of having team spirit in the family and seemed to navigate among individual, dyadic, and triadic needs. Furthermore, the participants in Finland

and Portugal highlighted the importance of mutual support. It is possible that in an individualist country like Finland, where support from relatives is not easily available, parents turn to each other and form a strong connection, a phenomenon that has been linked to collectivist values (e.g., Sumari et al., 2020). This tendency for couples to rely solely on mutual support can, however, be harmful in the long run and lead to exhaustion (Aunola et al., 2023). It is also possible that the tendency to see parenting as a couple task instead of family-based task is also increasing and shaping the construction of coparenting in Portugal and Japan because of rising individualism (e.g., Ogihara, 2017).

Inter-country differences were also found in the ways expectant parents understood the concept of support—whether it was something couples expected to obtain from each other or from other people. While Finnish and Portuguese expectant parents, especially women, talked a lot about the importance of mutual discussion, encouragement, and understanding, their Japanese counterparts only seldom mentioned such issues. In Japanese the word support has a nuanced connotation of special support from an external source, whereas support inside family is regarded as self-evident. In addition, Takeishi et al. (2019) noted that Japanese people sometimes have trouble in sharing their emotions with each other. Hence the study contributes to a new understanding of how culturally appropriate ways of communicating can shape parents' talk about coparenting expectations. More research is needed to better interpret these findings.

Multiple cultural models were identified within countries, with both traditional, and non-traditional models coexisting in all samples despite their different family policies and gender regimes. An ambivalent model consisted of couples wishing for equal practices but nevertheless seeing the mother as the primary carer. Such variation in cultural models might be a sign of change and greater diversity (Nagase & Holloway, 2022).

This study contributed to the development of research methodologies on coparenting which are currently mostly quantitative by revealing some potential challenges in measuring coparenting cross-nationally. These issues may be one reason why some measures and some sub-dimensions (e.g., division of labor in Coparenting Relationship Scale) may work poorly in cross-national samples (Takeishi et al., 2019; Tissot et al., 2024). We identified country differences in how participants understood some dimensions of coparenting, such as the topic of mutual support. Our approach also revealed some key tensions and dilemmas in the construction of coparenting such as navigating and balancing between traditional and modern as well as individual and family values, thereby adding to our understanding of the construction of coparenting.

Limitations

Studying coparenting cross-nationally with qualitative interviews demands sensitivity to the cultural context in developing interview questions, adapting them for use in different countries and languages, analyzing the data in different languages, coding the data and interpreting the findings. The decisions in these key phases were made by following good practices from earlier cross-national interview studies (Chapple & Ziebland, 2018; Fedi et al., 2019) and choosing our analysis strategy drawing on both the coding reliability thematic analysis and the codebook thematic analysis (see Braun & Clarke, 2022). We developed a structural coding system and applied intercoder reliability as a tool to ensure greater robustness in the analysis and findings. Intercoder agreement percentage (instead of Kappa) was selected as the intercoder assessment tool, as the coding frame was simple and the coders were experienced in coparenting (Halpin, 2024). However, a disadvantage of intercoder agreement percentages is that they can be influenced by the number of codes whereas Kappa corrects percent agreement for chance. In our study, interrater agreement was not the primary means of ensuring coding reliability, but rather a step in the methodological process. It helped to identify the least clear aspects of the coding, thereby contributing to the development of reliable coding instructions.

Another challenge was related to the concept of coparenting, which may not be familiar to all parents. We used Feinberg's model (2003) to formulate interview questions, a choice which may have affected our findings by leading participants to mention coparenting dimensions based on this model. However, many informants brought these issues up spontaneously in their interviews.

The participants in the three countries differed from each other in many background factors, but these differences were mostly due to differences in the country's sociodemographic characteristics. The finding that the Portuguese parents had a less favorable financial situation compared to the others is in line with the fact that Portuguese households earn less and receive fewer resources than the average EU household (PORDATA, 2021). The Japanese expectant mothers were older than their Finnish and Portuguese counterparts which corresponds to the 2021 statistics on the mean age in years of mothers at their first births in Japan (30.9) (MHLW, 2022), Portugal (30.4), and Finland (29.8) (UNECE data portal, 2021). Participating Finnish mothers, who differed from the Japanese mothers in being more educated, were also more educated than Finnish mothers in general, a factor which may have been reflected in our findings, as individuals with higher socioeconomic status typically have more resources and tend to have more gender-equal attitudes than those from less privileged socioeconomic groups (e.g., Alakärppä et al., 2022). All the participants were living in an opposite-sex relationship. Future studies should aim at

samples with more diverse family forms, educational backgrounds, and life situations.

Furthermore, the data were collected during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is possible that this unexpected situation when support from services and relatives was less available than normally colored couples' expectations of coparenting in some way. As the experiences of pandemic can be both positive (e.g., increasing weness and resilience) or negative (e.g., increasing worry, limiting support) (Kuusiaho et al., 2025), it is difficult to evaluate how pandemic may have affected the results of the study.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND POLICY

Parenting education programs and services for expectant parents could encourage expectant parents with varying sociocultural backgrounds to find positive, culturally appropriate ways of working as a team, building team spirit, supporting each other, sharing duties, communicating with each other and learning to deal with agreements (Kekkonen et al., 2023). Such programs and services could also offer expectant parents a space for discussing their wishes and worries relating to future coparenting.

The findings of this study also revealed some of the key drivers and barriers of constructing coparenting. In all three countries, sharing parenting responsibilities fairly seemed to be a key driver of well-functioning coparenting, thereby testifying to the increasing relevance of the so-called gender equality framework in coparenting (see Kekkonen et al., 2023). To tackle barriers to father involvement, and enhance gender equality in parenting, equality-related policies (such as nontransferable parental leave for fathers) are needed. Our findings reveal that an intensive work culture, especially in Japan, and an intensive motherhood culture, both of which limit father participation, are barriers to supportive and fair coparenting. Among the Japanese expectant parents, a heavy work culture (Ono, 2018), together with traditional gender norms (see Piotrowski et al., 2015), and extensive leave provisions for childcare at home (An & Peng, 2016) seemed to have created a situation for expectant Japanese women in which they were simply unable to expect anything and just accept the status quo. Although Japanese fathers have fully secured their right to take parental leave, the local work culture may hinder its uptake. It is therefore important to raise awareness of coparenting in Japan and globally. We also noted that, despite family policies promoting coparenting, the traditional family model remains a strong cultural ideal across these three countries (Sayer & Gornick, 2012). It seems that across the three countries, coparenting flourishes best when mothers and fathers are not required to invest heavily in either parenthood or in work but instead have the possibility to achieve a balance between these two life domains.

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Conflict Of Interest Disclosures

Each author signed a form for disclosure of potential conflicts of interest. No authors reported any financial or other conflicts of interest in relation to the work described.

Ethical Principles

The authors affirm having followed professional ethical guidelines in preparing this work. These guidelines include obtaining informed consent from human participants, maintaining ethical treatment and respect for the rights of human or animal participants, and ensuring the privacy of participants and their data, such as ensuring that individual participants cannot be identified in reported results or from publicly available original or archival data. The requirements of the EU General Data Protection Regulation were followed. Ethical approval was received from all the consortium partners' organizations, and research permissions were received from municipalities. As the researchers were aware of the possibility that the questions of the study could evoke memories of negative experiences and emotions in some participants, all interviewers were trained in how to deal with such situations. Due to the COVID pandemic, most interviews were conducted online.

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Data Availability Statement

The Finnish data will be openly published in the Finnish Social Science Data Archive after the end of the research project.

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Appendix. Coding frame

Themes and subthemes	Description
Sharing of responsibilities	
(1) Equality in workloads	The participant expects both partners to have an equal/similar workload and time with the child and childcare and equal responsibility for childcare and home duties (not necessarily similar types of work but similar workloads, so that both take equal responsibility and divide tasks equally). Note: equality must be explicitly mentioned.
(2) Primacy of one parent (sharing based on gender)	The participant expects that responsibilities will not be equally shared and that one parent will be the primary caregiver or breadwinner due to gender and related abilities (e.g., biology, breastfeeding, sensitivity, career, or gender role).
(3) Sharing based on abilities (not related to gender)	The participant expects the partners to share responsibilities based on each other's strengths or abilities (each does the thing they are good at) and describes sharing, which is not based on equality or primacy, but on other issues.
Support received/given from partner (mutual support)	
(1) Emotional support	Expression of expectations of emotional support from one's partner (e.g., listening, talking about emotions and needs, emotional work, supporting, understanding, encouraging, trusting each other)
(2) Practical or financial support	Expressions relating to expectations of getting help from one's partner in domestic and childcare duties, e.g., when one is tired, the other helps, of helping in concrete issues, or expressions relating to financial support (e.g., via earnings).
Agreeing/negotiating on childrearing	
(1) Finding agreement	The participant expects the parents to have similar child-rearing ideas, agree on child-rearing issues, or ending up in agreement after discussing/communicating/expressing one's opinion freely and understanding each other's point of view (code here if the participant expects some disagreement but ultimately expects agreement).
(2) Disagreement	Expressions indicating the participant expects disagreements, different ideas or opinions, or conflicts in childrearing, code here if participant mentions minor disagreements that do not end in agreement. Note, that it is possible to code both this and the previous subtheme: for example, if the participant expects agreement on big issues but disagreement on small issues.
(3) Primacy of one parent	Expressions where participant emphasizes the other parent's primacy in decisions/choices about ways of childrearing and parenthood.
(4) Giving up	Expressions indicating giving up, accepting conflicting views, no arguments
We-ness versus individual time	
(1) Weness	The participant expects family togetherness/cohesion (e.g., being a team, doing parenthood together, learning things together, various metaphors for a shared project, parenting as a tie between the couple. Note, mentions of shared upbringing ideals and values are coded as "agreement/negotiating on childrearing."
(2) Individual time	The participant expects to have time for self, hobbies, work, or to have individual time or time for individual career development and decisions.
Involvement of parents in childcare and child rearing	
(1) Both parents involved with the child	The participant expects that both (or the other parent) will or should be involved in childcare, have full responsibility, want to learn to know the child and form a relationship with the child, and want a good relationship with the child, that both parents are active and involved and grow as parents. Note: gender equality is not a justification here.
(2) Forming individual, dyadic relationship with the child	The participant talks only about her/his own parenthood and relationship with the child.