

What and whom are family policies for? Unpacking the meaning of citizens' support for family policy across Europe

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Abstract

The paper provides a comparative investigation into public attitudes to family policies. It shows that citizens' support for family policies is diverse across different welfare regimes with respect to four countries belonging to distinct regimes: the UK, Germany, Norway and Slovenia. Using qualitative data, we unpack the ways individuals view the need for family policies, the rationale they use to explain their support for family policies and for imposing restrictions on access to family policies – i.e. why, for whom, and under which conditions. We find that social rights narratives are common in Norway; a social investment logic is prevalent in Germany and

Slovenia; while in the UK the dominant view is closer to the work-central individualized responsibility narrative of neoliberalism. In addition, we find differences across regimes in who family policies should target. In the UK and Germany, the focus is much more on providing support to activate parents, while in Norway and partly Slovenia the focus is on providing well-being for children. The findings show that despite some convergence in family policies across Europe in recent times, we still find clear diversity in what and for whom family policies are for, its rationale largely embedded in the larger institutional normative structures of the welfare state. The results not only contribute to the literature on the relationship between public attitudes and welfare institutions, but also point towards shifting ideas about the role of family policies in the context of societal change.

Key words: welfare attitudes, family policy, welfare regimes, conditionality

Introduction

Developments in European welfare states have for some time been characterized by the introduction of cuts and austerity measures in almost all areas of the welfare state (Taylor-Gooby, Leruth & Chung, 2017). Opposing this general trend, the past three decades or so have seen an expansion in family policies (Ferragina & Seeleib-Kaiser, 2015), indicating a convergence in the increasing relevance of this policy field. In addition, an important convergence trend was in the role of European Union and its activities concerning how family policies are shaped and the larger rationale behind its introduction in the political discourse, especially with growing importance of social investment logic in the European social model (see Hemerijck, 2017). Still, following the Great Recession in 2008, family policy was not completely safe from cuts, especially with regard to cash benefits (Bothfeld & Rouault, 2015). Consequently, conditionality in family policies is increasingly common.

This paper aims to capture facets of the perceptions of family policies. Our analysis builds on the assumption that support for certain family policies is based on a wide range of reasons, ranging from the extension of social rights, to a more neoliberal approach grounded in the need to activate the labour force. Our main research interest is unpacking the meaning held by the general support for family policies in different welfare regimes. We provide insights into how individuals reason and capture differences and similarities across regimes in their perceptions of what and for whom family policies should be, examining whether convergence or regime differences prevail. We adopt a qualitative methodology based on analysis of data from focus groups in four European countries (UK, Germany, Norway and Slovenia), in contrast to the mostly quantitative approaches taken to the study of welfare attitudes (Chung, Taylor-Gooby, & Leruth, 2018). The main contribution of the methodological approach adopted in this paper lies in its ability to give insights into citizens' reasoning and rationale behind policy issues

within a cross-country comparison. That is, seemingly similar attitudes and preferences may rest on different sets of underlying motivations and rationales. We maintain that attitudes to family policy may be interpreted in various ways across regimes/countries relative to their ideological stances and purpose/aim. Another added value of the paper is that the qualitative data presented are comparable cross-nationally, which is rarely the case with such data.

Focus group discussions were conducted in four European countries that represent distinct welfare regimes (UK, Germany, Norway and Slovenia) (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Korpi, Ferrarini, & Englund, 2013; Javornik, 2020) to ask which welfare benefits or services should be provided to whom, and under what conditions. Therefore, our research was framed on the conditionality perspective as a central dimension of social policy, trying to understand the ‘levels’ and ‘levers’ of conditionality (see Clasen & Clegg, 2007) and deservingness criteria (see van Oorschot & Roosma, 2017). In addition, following the distinction between different approaches to family policy drawn by Daly (2019), we leveraged the division between child-centred and parent-centred viewpoints as determined by whether the primary focus for family policy support is on children or adults. We chose this approach in our comparative analysis because previous studies have shown that current policy structures (Chung & Meuleman, 2017) and institution/regime typologies (Larsen, 2008; Valarino et al., 2017; Toikko & Rantanen, 2017) are largely responsible for shaping attitudes to welfare policies. Hence, we expect to find differences across regimes in how individuals view the conditionalities in family policies and the logic behind these beliefs. In line with the family policies chosen for discussion by the focus group participants spontaneously, we narrow our focus to three core family-policy areas (see Gauthier, 2010): childcare, child/family cash benefits, and parental leave. This enables a ‘bottom-up’ approach without the steering and introduction of policy areas by researchers,

differing from a top-down approach in a pre-designed survey questionnaire (see Taylor-Gooby & Leruth, 2018; Chung, Taylor-Gooby, & Leruth, 2018).

The next section examines what we know so far about ideological stances in welfare policies, more specifically in the provision of family policies. We go on to discuss paradigmatic trends and changes in conditionalities in family policies in the four countries, discussing our findings in relation to these paradigms based on the focus group participants' views and rationales for support as well as the conditionality within family policies.

Family policy and a conditionality perspective

Welfare paradigms and family policies

Understanding differences in citizens' support for family policies across different welfare regimes can be based on three different paradigms that characterize(d) reforms of the welfare states. Namely, social policies in general, as well as family policies in particular, have been expanded through various paradigms that differ in their diagnosis of the problems, their solutions and instruments, and justification for state involvement (see Morel, Palier & Palme, 2012).

First, the Keynesian strategies that dominated during the post-war period in Europe concentrated on increasing demand through public spending, generous social benefits, and social insurance schemes. This approach centred on the principle of equality. Welfare policies were developed as part of individuals' social rights (Marshall, 1950) and family income support (including child benefit) was expanded in many countries during this period. This meant a strong emphasis on family-oriented policies, recognizing family support as a social right of adults, while the focus on children was only indirect. In addition, public childcare was already

being developed during this period in countries like Sweden and Denmark in response to demands for greater gender equality, and the pedagogical needs of children. This explains why even today these policies can be considered part of social rights (Ministry of Education and Science in Sweden, 1999; Ellingsæter & Gulbrandsen, 2007).

In the 1970s, following the oil price hike and slow economic growth, a neoliberal paradigm developed as a direct attack on Keynesian policies (Morel, Palier, & Palme, 2012). Retrenchment of the welfare state, characterized by a tightening of benefit conditions and privatization of public services, was seen as part of the solution. This led to increased conditionality for families seeking income support. However, neoliberal policies do not necessarily require retrenching all areas of social policy. A workfare approach, chiefly aimed at enabling parents to remain in or join the workforce, was enabled by expanding childcare or parental leave schemes. Here, family policies were not based on a right but were rather a way to ‘activate’ individuals by targeting a certain population based on conditionality criteria, while service provision was chiefly market-based (Mahon et al., 2012).

The social investment paradigm emerged as a critique of the neoliberal agenda and perceives social policies as a long-term investment. However, it does not prioritise reducing poverty or social inequality and places less emphasis on provision of welfare as a social right (Jenson 2009). Social investment theories focus on policies that invest in the human capital of workers to increase their employability (Morel, Palier & Palme, 2012), where social rights are tethered to an economic agenda. Formal childcare meets two goals: first, as an investment in future human resources (children); second, to facilitate the full use of female human capital. Family policies hence remain parent-centred yet usually childhood-oriented; emphasizing not only parental work duties but also a well-resourced childhood as preparation for adult life (Daly,

2019). Put differently, children are treated primarily as “citizen-workers of the future” or “adults in becoming” (Lister, 2003; Jenson & Saint-Martin, 2006) .

The distinction between the neoliberal vs. social investment drivers of childcare policies across countries and care regimes has already been identified by Mahon and colleagues (2012) in their analysis of childcare policy developments in Canada, Australia comparing them to that of Finland, and Sweden. They claim that while these two distinct clusters of countries both use social investment and neoliberal frames, they are still bounded by historical legacies and institutionally embedded policies and discourses. In other words, in Canada and Australia social investment strategies are bounded by neoliberal frames of free choice. Similarly, in this paper we maintain that given the historical legacies of the four countries under study, the logic/paradigms behind the support for family policies (especially childcare) will be diverse. To better understand this, we need to consider the legacies and recent developments in the conditionalities of family policies across the four countries.

Paradigm trends and conditionalities in family policies across the four countries

Two trends can be seen as a point of convergence within family policies, namely the social investment emphasis, linked to the context of European Union, as well as neoliberal agenda, related to the austerity measures in times of economic crisis after 2008. Consistent with the activation emphasis and the social investment perspective, childcare policies have been expanded in recent years, particularly in countries that had poorly developed childcare services (Adema, Clarke & Thévenon, 2020). For instance, Germany has significantly increased the public provision of childcare. Childcare has also been expanded in the UK, but with subsidized childcare mainly for poor families or for those meeting certain in-work criteria. By contrast, Norway has one of the highest levels of childcare coverage in the EU (Eurostat, 2019), and

children have a statutory right to day care from age 1. Similarly, Slovenia's socialist legacy of well-developed childcare services was sheltered from any major cuts, with unconditional access for all children above 11 months.

In the context of the neoliberal agenda, with various degrees and variations across countries, a general trend that can be observed is increased prioritizing of parental employment, as well as greater conditionality, in particular by linking provision of rights to employment records. While the more universally-oriented child(hood)-centred approach in family policy leans more towards developing children as human capital (Morel, Palier & Palme, 2012), the more conditional parent-centred approach prioritizes facilitating parental employment, with the particular goal of increasing women's participation in the labour market (Jenson, 2009).

In accessing family benefits, there is a trend toward greater selectivity with an emphasis on means-testing and need. This is a subversion of the principle of universality which was once enshrined in family policies across Europe (Daly, 2019). The employment of mothers (especially lone mothers) has been stimulated by changes to benefit and taxation policy in addition to the growth in childcare provision, especially in the UK and Germany (Daly & Ferragina 2018; Windebank, 2017). Concurrently, there has been a general trend towards increased selectivity in child benefits. In Slovenia, for example, austerity measures were most pronounced in the area of family cash benefits, which were framed as social transfers for the most needy (Filipovič Hrast & Rakar, 2020). Similarly, in the UK, the once universal child benefit was limited to children only from low-income families and a two-child limit was imposed on child tax credit and universal credit. Among the countries examined, Norway and Germany still have a universal child benefit. While it is becoming increasingly modest in relative terms in Norway,

child benefits remain a crucial and largely uncontested element of the conservative heritage of German family policy.

With regard to parental leave, the general trend has been to expanding fathers' rights to extended leave, in countries like Norway, Germany and Slovenia. At the same time, a key motivation has been to support women's labour market participation. In Germany, an extension of the parental leave scheme was introduced in 2015 that seeks to combine the two goals: parental benefits in this scheme are conditional on both parents working part-time and taking part-time parental leave. In the UK, shared parental leave has been expanded whereby a father can take up the remaining weeks of maternity leave not been used by the mother. Still, due to low replacement rates, its take up has been minimal. In terms of conditionality for parental leave schemes, a convergence is observed in the recent shifts to mixed systems that combine (flat-rate) citizenship-based parental leave rights with (more generous) employment-based parental leave rights (Dobrotič & Blum, 2019b; Morel et al., 2012).

Despite the discussed convergences, historical and institutional legacies play an important role and form a relevant background for understanding citizens' views. Differences between family policies are, like for other social policies, rooted in "ideological notions on social citizenship" (Kvist, 2007: 200), which refers to the dominant perceptions of the state's role in providing opportunities and services to individuals (Clasen & Clegg, 2007; Dobrotič & Blum, 2019a). In social-democratic welfare states (e.g., Norway), social rights are traditionally universal and tied to citizenship or residence, while in conservative (e.g., Germany) and liberal (e.g., UK) regimes social rights are conditional, based on employment in the former and need in the latter (Esping-Andersen 1990). In Slovenia, we find a hybrid model that combines elements of the conservative and social-democratic regimes (Filipovič Hrast & Rakar, 2020).

We may therefore expect the different welfare regimes to influence citizens' attitudes, since existing policy structures shape their attitudes to welfare and views on the extent to which the state should provide a certain benefit or service (Ahn & Kim, 2014; Goerres & Tepe, 2010, 2012) or who deserves those benefits or services (Koostra & Roosma 2018). Institutional contexts may shape how individuals rely on their ideological stances to find a narrative for not only who should receive what, but also why this should be the case. We will analyse how citizens in the four countries being studied understand family policies and the related conditionalities in their countries relative to the three paradigms described (Keynesianism, neoliberal paradigm, social investment paradigm), and variation in their reasoning for offering support (i.e., parent- or child(hood)-centred rationale).

Design and Methods

In order to study individuals' support for family policies through their conditionality perceptions, we use data from focus groups carried out in the capitals of the four analysed countries (UK, Norway, Germany, Slovenia) in 2016 as part of the comparative, NORFACE-funded research project "Our Children's Europe" (2015–2018). In each country, in order to obtain a wide range of discussions and diversity of opinions, five focus groups were conducted among different socio-demographic groups that discussed several vignettes representing diverse target groups (see Appendix). For the present article, we analyse the data on the aggregate country level, not the group level, yet we acknowledge additional differences exist across gender, class, age lines (Chung & Meuleman, 2017; Garritzmann & Schwander, 2021), which are beyond the scope of our article. The differences across countries were generally much more evident than among various socio-demographic groups within countries (Taylor-Gooby & Leruth, 2018).

The design of the focus groups was the same in each country. Every focus group had 8 to 10 participants of a different age, gender, family status, education, occupation, income, political orientation and migration background, and the discussion lasted two hours. After an introductory exercise concerning the participants' general views on the welfare state, the participants discussed several vignettes in terms of the benefits and services the predefined target groups deserved and the conditions, if any, that should apply. We were particularly interested in the attitudes and discussions on the vignette that describes *a family on an average wage with children under 3 years of age in good health*, although the participants also discussed issues referring to family policy with respect to other vignettes, which we took into account where relevant (see Appendix). It was up to the participants to decide which family policy measures they wished to discuss. Transcripts of the discussions were coded in NVivo using a comparative and commonly agreed coding scheme, relying on a combination of deductive and inductive approaches to coding. Based on this, we performed a systematic comparative analysis of the participants' attitudes to family policy in the countries under study (see Appendix, as well as *Our Children's Europe* project's open access data repository (Taylor-Gooby, 2020).

Citizens' attitudes to conditionality in family policies in the four countries

The UK

The policies most commonly discussed in the UK were public childcare, or the lack thereof, and child benefits. However, some of the discussions on child benefits were mixed with discussions surrounding other benefits provided to the unemployed. This is due to the welfare benefit systems in the UK, where many of the benefits individuals can receive for childcare

purposes (e.g., childcare tax credits) are income-linked, while other benefits (e.g., housing) are directly means-tested, whereby having a child influences access to these benefits.

Most of the discussion centred on the impact on parents – their right or ability to work, and the financial impact of having children, rather than the impact family policies may have on children. The few exceptions were when participants talked about how the lack of provisions might end up “penalising the kids” (UK, Y-n.i. (1)).

One reason for this parent-centred discussion is the cost of childcare in the UK, which is among the most expensive among all OECD/European countries. There is also a lack of childcare spaces, especially for younger children (Chung, Hrast, & Rakar, 2018). Against this backdrop, the main discussions focused on the cost of childcare and how, without well-paid jobs, most parents are unable to cover this cost.

It is extremely expensive and there is very little incentive to go back to work as a mother. You have got to be earning a lot over the national average to be able to just break even after childcare. (UK, MC-1)

When talking about a low-income family with children and what they might need, childcare emerged as a key policy the welfare state should provide.

So, you might be better off not working and just stay at home. They need to do something on childcare and like help. (UK, W-n.i.)

We generally found that in the UK the narratives were embedded in a neoliberal paradigm with acceptance of stringent conditionalities and a targeted approach to those in need. The main conditionality considered was family income levels, clearly relying on a needs-based justification. In addition, participants' understanding of the context of the high-cost of childcare also shaped their perception of 'need' (also see Chung & Meuleman, 2017). There was much discussion around single parents and their additional needs due to the lack of a partner able to provide additional financial support or care.

If you are a single parent, then it may be very difficult to work unless there is totally free childcare provided. (UK, MC-n.i.)

Need was also used to frame who should receive priority in receiving benefits and services; namely, that benefits and services should not be 'wasted' on those who do not need it. When talking about free childcare hours:

It seems crazy that it is a blanket thing, but not everybody needs that. It seems like a bit of a waste to me. ... (UK, MC-10)

This once again points to the fact that participants regarded childcare more as a device to enable parents (back) into work, rather than a part of children's social rights to early education.

In 2017, the UK government capped child benefits to two children, meaning no benefits are given for third or additional children. This was mentioned in the description given in the narrative of the typical "benefit scrounger" in the UK (i.e., individuals who are considered to be relying on benefits by having a large family) (also see Zimmerman, Chung & Heuer, 2018).

I do agree in capping benefits because if you are not going to work and you are just popping out kids every year.... (UK, Y- n.i.)

Generally, participants expressed stigma against benefit recipients, especially those receiving Jobseeker's Allowance on top of child benefits (also see Baumberg, Bell & Gaffney, 2012).

There was some infrequent support for universal benefits and services. One participant commented on the bureaucratic nature of means-testing, while others talked about the benefits of a universal system like in Sweden where “everybody pays quite a bit more tax [...] but then you get so much more” (UK, Y-n.i.).

Very few participants pointed to social rights to support their positions. The only mentions came on the very few occasions when maternity and paternity leave were discussed – namely, the need to have more paternity leave was taken up by participants as an issue of the social right of fathers to be able to take leave as much as mothers do, framed in the language of “choice”.

The majority of discussions on why welfare should be given, or which conditionality should be used, centred heavily on economic reasoning. For example, one of the most frequent claims was that publicly provided childcare services are generally needed because otherwise the costs would hinder parents from working. Much of the discussion touched on the economic calculations families need to make while deciding to work vs. being on benefits in the current policy contexts. In other words, “reluctant individualism” (Taylor-Gooby, Leruth & Chung, 2019) was prevalent in the UK data, where the focus was mostly on giving individuals the

opportunity to take part in the labour market so as to earn a living, which was regarded as an individual's highest responsibility.

The reciprocity rationale did arise; namely, the potential of additional tax revenues that can be gained by enabling parents to work by increasing access to childcare services. Interestingly, even here, social investment narratives were not as common as one would expect. The majority of participants believed the main role of childcare services is to enable parents to re-enter the workforce, since individuals' upmost responsibility is participating in the labour market and earning a living.

Germany

In Germany, the discussions mostly revolved around childcare, while parental leave and family tax deductions were rarely discussed. This focus on childcare reflects the political debate underway at the time of the fieldwork, with free childcare and the expansion of childcare having then been on the political agenda. This focus reflects the individual concerns of participants, with many relating to personal stories of difficulties finding or paying for childcare.

The discussions were mostly parent-centred, where the strongest narrative was that working parents should be provided with childcare:

I think childcare should be free. ... So that both parents can go to work. (DE, MC-7)

However, many statements calling for statutory action in childcare provision did not explicitly refer to the needs of working parents, and the dual-worker model was an implicit point of reference for almost all participants. This dual-worker model was only explicitly questioned by

one participant who emphasized, from a mostly parent-centred perspective, the high workload in dual-worker families:

I think the state should support the family so that one of the parents can stay at home to take care of the children. I see it again and again with parents [...], they're under stress, under pressure, and sometimes really become ill. (DE, WC-4)

Among the few child-centred statements, none were in favour of the single-earner model (as one might expect for Germany), but instead the relevance of early childhood education was highlighted. Here, childcare was understood as being vital for preparing children for life, in line with the social investment paradigm:

But I think nursery school is very important for preparing children for social contact in life and for beginning to learn and follow a schedule. Not every parent can teach this. (DE, Y-3)

Early childhood education was often also understood as vital for creating equal starting opportunities. Educational inequalities were a crucial topic in general in the discussions, and this was also visible in the debates on family policies.

[...] when those who have a lot of money send their children to private nursery schools, then you start with this two-class society. I think everyone should go to nursery schools, and it should be free for everyone. (DE, R-7)

Consequently, it is no surprise that many participants were in support of universal and unconditional childcare. Participants agreed that universal childcare should be provided by the state, and no one at any time suggested that childcare should only be for working parents. Still, positions were quite divided on the role of means-testing. While several participants stressed that childcare should be free, others expressed that it should be income-related.

It is also in this context where the sole explicitly social-right-related discussion was observed, with one participant asserting that childcare is a right of both children and parents:

If the nursery school teachers/caregivers can still be adequately paid and don't suffer in any way, then I think it's good [that childcare is free of charge], because every child has the right to that, and every family. (DE, Y-3)

Interestingly, those in favour of income-related childcare costs did not rely on a 'last resort' position, whereby social services should only be for the poor. Instead, the rationale behind income-related childcare costs was mainly that better-off earners should also pay their fair share:

You could expect those families earning a certain net amount might have to pay something into it additionally for childcare, for instance in order to finance less fortunate families [...]. (DE, MC-7)

The German debates show that the neoliberal position on a family policy that should support the dual-worker model is well grounded in citizens' ideological thinking. Almost all participants saw childcare as a crucial instrument for ensuring both parents could participate

actively in the labour market, and hence the discussion was largely parent-centred. Certainly, while interpreting the data, we had to take into account that the discussions took place in Berlin, which is not only a big city but also partly has an East German legacy (2). Discussions in rural areas in former West Germany might have produced different results. Nevertheless, it is remarkable that in a country which around a decade ago had a highly conservative family policy, not a single child-centred or pro home-care statement appears. Instead, as the discussion shows, the social-investment-related idea of early childhood education as vital for children's future prospects is strongly immanent in citizens' sense-making.

Norway

An extensive range of policies was considered relevant for children and families in Norway. Equality and social inclusion were dominant justifications for many of the positions held. The issue of conditionality emerged while discussing needs related to risks such as unemployment or lone parenthood. While there was more support for universal access to services than for benefits, it was widely accepted that 'needy' families could receive higher benefits or pay less than the already subsidized standard fee for such services (e.g., day care), or alternatively lower taxes.

I think that lower taxes for single parents are important [...] you will have more money left over to pay bills [...]. (NO, W-1)

While institutional childcare was seen to support the dual-earner model, some participants also framed it as being positive for the child. In contrast to the other countries (especially the UK), children were clearly identified as deserving in their capacity as children, regardless of what the parents do or earn, reflecting a social rights logic.

Deserve it or not? That's the question. The issue, when speaking of day-care, is the children who deserve it, regardless of whether the parents follow the rules or earn more money or less money. (NO, WC-6)

Similarly, some participants demonstrated a child-centred perspective on unemployment entitlements. It was generally agreed that children should not bear the burden of their parents' unemployment or other forms of hardship.

Children should have the same right to education and healthcare [...]. It shouldn't make a difference if the parents lose their jobs. It shouldn't matter for the children's education. (NO, WC-7)

This viewpoint implicitly centres on the needs of the child and mainly follows a social rights-based logic, prioritizing children's needs and well-being regardless of the cost to the public purse. Universal (i.e., affordable and readily available) institutionalized childcare benefits children and parents alike.

Regarding an after-school programme and day-care: [...] for example, children of immigrants and economically disadvantaged groups, they would benefit from the social setting that day-care offers. Another thing is that women [...] lose [...] pension points. (NO, R-6)

Another topic framed in relation to both the child and the parents was parental leave in general and the 'daddy quota' in particular. The following quote illustrates this point:

The part of parental leave that is reserved for the father has been cut by 4 weeks or something. It should be raised again. [...]. It matters a lot that a child has a good relationship with their father, but also so the mum can get outside.... (NO, Y-2)

Means-testing was mainly discussed with respect to child benefits. However, no consensus was reached on means-testing versus the current universal child benefit. At present, a modest, flat-rate child benefit is awarded per child from birth until age 18 (3). A key issue is that, in real terms, its relative value has declined significantly over the past 20 years. At the time of the focus groups (October 2016), the nominal benefit amount had not been increased since 1996. Therefore, a common position held in the debate was that means-testing would allow a considerable increase in child benefit for those who actually need it.

The discussion on whether [child benefits] should be means tested or not, I actually think it was about time, because for some it means nothing, while others would need more to make ends meet. (NO, MC-6)

Overall, while there was some disagreement on the details of the institutional design, strong support was given for having a range of universally available services. Only a few statements revealed a clear social investment rationale. The simple message was that in the long run society benefits both economically and socially.

I think for the future it is important to invest in families with young children who are future workers... (NO, MC-2)

Slovenia

The discussions in Slovenia largely concerned the issue of child benefits and subsidies for public childcare, without any discussion of parental leave policies. It was asserted that the state should help parents in supporting their children, (i.e., to bear some of the costs). The dominant parent-centred statements were linked to economic reasoning and the parent's labour market participation. However, these ideas were not very clearly expressed and seemed to be the basis for launching further discussions on the conditionality of benefits and subsidies (i.e., the difference in amount and/or duration of subsidies and childcare services between employed and unemployed parents, and the relevance of parents' income). It was rare for participants to explicitly mention the importance of public childcare for parents being able to work, although one quote below illustrates this clearly. This line of reasoning is linked to the long tradition of public childcare provision and near full employment of women (Kanjuo Mrčela & Černigoj Sadar, 2011).

Because more people are working, contributing to the state, we can actually do more as a state. So, these subsidies are very logical from this point of view because they encourage that as much as possible mothers or fathers Also, because of women. Women are not excluded from the labour market for such a long time, because it can later be hard to integrate back into work. (SI, MC-7)

Like in the UK, a parent-centred discussion also took place surrounding the impact of benefits on work motivation and labour market inclusion. The lack of incentives to work due to the receipt of child benefits and income-linked payment of childcare was discussed quite extensively.

But there is one group of people which exploit it quite well and live well, and for whom it does not pay to go to work because then they would lose all these transfers and, if they received a pay check, they would essentially give over all of their salary to pay for kindergarten, school, because they have become more expensive and so, essentially, in a way the state promotes that you don't work, that you live at the expense of the state. (SI, W-4)

Child-centred statements were also made, with child benefits recognized as a right of children (“The child benefit belongs to the child. It’s not for the parent.” (SI, WC-7)), in line with social rights rationale. Transfers and care were understood as a social right of the child and therefore no conditions should be imposed on children, including conditions based on parental income.

Let’s say that child benefits amount to EUR 110. Every child gets it, regardless of whether their parents have a salary of EUR 5,000 or EUR 300. (SI, WC-7)

That’s the moral solution, yes. (SI, WC-2).

The social investment perspective was seen in support of public childcare and therefore the development of children’s skills, their socialization, and their integration.

After all, the mere fact that children are in kindergarten is an essential part of the education and socialization of a child And this is also a strong aspect of the welfare state. We should not see kindergartens only through money. (SI, MC-5)

Despite the unconditionality present in more child-centred parts of the discussion, most of the statements made were conditional. The conditions were linked to family income (“Those who have more should pay more.” (SI, WC-1)), and parental status, (e.g., single parenthood, family size). All these statements seem to be based on need.

I don't agree with the idea of an equal price for kindergarten for everyone... I believe a family with that amount of income should pay less than someone with a decent income who can afford to save money and invest in funds. (SI, Y-3)

And not just that, it's not only about the money, one parent who is a single parent, who doesn't have any parents, or relatives or such... I would say that they are entitled to some transfers, simply because they are alone for everything. (SI, W-9)

Another dimension of conditionality was linked to willingness to work, consistent with neoliberal thinking. This was seen as something upon which the receipt of benefits should depend.

A further position in support of family policies centred on support for children and large families that would later be returned to society through employment and taxes while also supporting pension systems. Such reciprocity rationale was mainly linked to the social investment perspective of investing in children.

I agree with you, what will eight children be, a burden on the welfare state but, on the other hand, all these people, not only will they work for pensions, our pensions, they will contribute to the state budget and for all other needs, right? (SI, W-9)

Discussion and conclusion

In discussing family policies, similar patterns appeared in all four countries, showing strong support for childcare based on social investment and neoliberal rationale, as well as the tendency to apply conditions to child benefit. This indicates that the discussed regime convergences in family policies are also accompanied by a certain convergence in attitudes among the population. However, historical legacies and welfare regimes still largely shaped the narratives and rationale used in the debates across the countries. Norway, for example, stands out as family policies were seen almost exclusively unconditionally and based on social rights. When conditions, especially need, were applied, this was only related to benefits on top of the universal benefits and services. There were more discussions around conditionality in the UK in line with the neoliberal discourse of targeted means-tested benefits and activating the workforce. Neoliberal economic reasoning was also present in Germany, yet the discussion was largely framed within the social investment perspective of investing in children for the future good of the economy. In Slovenia, discussions were characterized by a mix of universality and conditionality, while a substantial part of the discussion was also framed around the social investment logic of the benefits for future society. Furthermore, there were clear variations among the countries in the family policies that the participants drew out for discussion, showing a link to regime/country differences in the relevance and significance of the particular family policy field. All this indicates that citizens' positions and reasoning about family policy are framed by the existing institutional logic and as such, policy debates are co-influencing and are being co-influenced by this underlying logic and reasoning (Mau, 2003).

The more child-centred the discussion, the more the statements made were unconditional. The child-centred perspective dominated the discussion in Norway. It was also present in Slovenia

and to a smaller extent in Germany, yet it was nearly absent in the UK. Hence, with the exception of Norway, a parent-centred focus prevailed. This might be linked to the fact that income benefits generally target parents and build on the condition of need, understood as a characteristic of families (Frazer & Marlier, 2017). As Daly (2019) notes, family policy is constrained by family law, since parents are obliged to support their children, which explains the dominance of the parent-centred approach.

However, our findings indicate that the parent-centred approach is often linked to the labour market, either from the social investment perspective or a more neoliberal or productivist perspective (Van der Veen & Groot, 2006). In other words, the main focus was on increasing labour market participation, which also becomes part of the conditionality embedded in support for the family policy. According to Daly (2019), even though it may seem that the social investment perspective is child-centred, the focus is more on childhood as a life course. Hence, children are actually seen from the perspective of becoming adults, i.e., objects for the future (and future workers and taxpayers) rather than as the subject of policies (Lister, 2003; Jenson & Saint-Martin, 2006). This was evident in the discussions around societal reciprocity and the notion of ‘children as the adults of tomorrow’. When considering the adult-centred view of parents’ labour market participation, the social investment perspective was not far from the neoliberal one. This echoes what has been raised by others who note that social investment strategies are less redistributive and less protective of the most vulnerable (Cantillon, 2011; Cantillon & Van Lancker, 2013) and can go hand-in-hand with retrenchment (Van Kersbergen, Vis, & Hemerijck 2014).

To conclude, this study provides a better understanding of the cross-country variation in individuals’ support for family policies and their underlying reasoning – i.e. for whom it is for,

and their rationale for imposing restrictions in access to family policies. Despite some similarities in the support for family policies, there were clear variations found across countries. More specifically, although support for more family policies can be interpreted as a move towards a social-investment-paradigm-led welfare state development, support for family policies can also be understood as citizens' support for a social-rights-based approach or even support for the neoliberalist approach of the individualization of responsibility. Similarly, discussions on the type and level of conditionality varied among the countries and again followed the pattern of conditionality predicted by the welfare regime theory. Hence, not only were variations observed in the level of support for the conditionalities in policies, but more importantly for the purposes of this paper, the reasoning for why such conditionalities must be imposed varied across the countries.

Our qualitative and small-scale study is not representative; yet it has an explorative value, which is useful as a starting point for future research on the rationale of citizens' support for family policies. As such, it offers one piece in the jigsaw to fully understand individuals' preferences and hence complements the more widespread quantitative approach to deciphering welfare state attitudes. Our results on how the conditionalities in family policies are viewed in different welfare regime contexts suggest the need to bridge the hitherto largely isolated debates on social citizenship, individual responsibilities and role of the state in a neoliberal era on one hand, and on family policies and gender relations on the other (Lüth, 2021). How are family policies included in activation welfare measures? What is the individual–familial responsibilities relationship in various institutional set-ups with different conceptions of social citizenship? Here, our results may open up new routes for future research on the shifting ideas about the role of family policies in the context of societal change.

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Disclosure statement

The authors declare no potential conflict of interest.

Endnotes

1. We use n.i. as an abbreviation for non-identified; other quotes are marked with codes assigned to the participants.
2. High female employment and universal childcare was a crucial characteristic of the former East Germany.
3. Single parents receive the benefit for one extra child. Two further supplements with several conditions attached are available for unemployed single parents with young children.

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