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Parenting Support as Policy Field: An Analytic Framework

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This article develops an analytic framework for parenting support, treating it as both a form of social policy and a measure that intervenes more broadly in politics and society. It is suggested that, as a form of social policy, parenting support can be examined through analytical categories that are classic to social policy, such as: the nature of the offer or 'good' to parents, the modality of provision, conditions of access and operation, the policy setting and linkages to other policies, the unfolding of the policy over time and historical roots, philosophical underpinnings and dominant professional influences. In a second layer, the social and political roots and orientations of parenting support have to be investigated. When one does this by, for example, identifying the main actors involved in parenting support and the rationales and claims made for parenting support as a policy response, it becomes obvious that parenting support can be either a benign project of support or part of a more controlling educative or retraining exercise.

Keywords: Parenting support as social policy, analytic framework, social and political intervention in families, social policy reform, comparative social policy analysis.

Introduction

There has taken place in many countries over the last ten to fifteen years or so a wide-ranging and rather rapid mobilisation of social policy to focus attention on, and effect a change in, parental behaviour and child-rearing competence. Parenting support is at the heart of this movement, which is not just confined to Europe (Daly *et al.*, 2015). As things stand, we lack an analytic framework to understand the phenomenon, especially in a comparative context, although there is a growing body of international work (ChildONEurope, 2007; Boddy *et al.*, 2009; Molinuevo, 2013).

The core objective of this article is to develop a way of studying and understanding parenting support that recognises the complexities and variations involved. To this end it develops an analytical framework for the purpose of comparing policy and practice developments in a way that recognises the field as complex, viewing it as containing a wide range of different types of provision and policy objectives (linked to historical developments in family policies/services and more contemporary developments in policy transfer and political and social exigencies in relation to children, parents and families). At its core, the article is underpinned by an argument for the need for further critical analysis around why parenting support initiatives and services have expanded in recent years, and are high up on several national and EU/international policy agencies' agendas. Serving as an overview of the field of parenting support cross-nationally, and especially taking account of the five countries presented in the individual pieces, the article probes parenting support as a service offer and as revealing contemporary policy thinking about

the needs of families with children. Parenting support is, however, more than a reflection of policy understandings but is an intervention that reaches deeply into politics and society. A dual, social policy and socio-political lens is therefore necessary. Parenting support is treated here then as, first, a window on the institutionalisation of a relatively new domain of social policy, interesting in its own right and also revealing of current trends and proclivities in family and social policy more generally. Secondly, parenting support is interrogated for the extent to which it is political in intent, pursued by parties with interests, and for this and other reasons is serving to spearhead a reinvention of the category of 'parent' and a reconfiguration of the relationship between family, state and society.

The article is organised around the two main levels of the analytic framework. The first, focusing on parenting support as a policy measure and type of service, identifies the core features and components of the policy configuration, outlining different strategic questions and considering some initial answers on the basis of the available evidence. In order to ascertain the social and political imprint of parenting support a second, in some ways deeper, layer of questioning is needed. This is developed in the second main part of the article in which parenting support is contextualised and its political and social significance explored through questions about the main actors and key rationales and justifications driving it. While organised basically around this two-part endeavour, the piece begins with a definition and scoping of the field and ends with a short concluding section.

This article, like the others in the themed section, is inspired by the research project funded under the Open Research Area research stream 2011–14 (known as the PolChi project). While the other articles present the results explicitly on a country-by-country basis, the results are reflected more indirectly here, taken forward as insights for constructing an analytic framework for studying parenting support, either in a national or international context.

Defining and scoping the field

There are three main reasons why parenting support needs to be carefully defined. The first is because it is not completely new as a concern of public policy or popular discourse. Policies have long existed to educate parents about child-rearing, and concerns about the quality of child-rearing have deep roots in popular debate in many countries and regions of the world. The second, related, reason is because parenting support is not necessarily stand-alone, but is often integrated with, or part of, other policies, particularly health policies and family services. Thirdly, there is the fact that parenting support means different things depending on the context and that the terminologies used vary, including 'parent education', 'family/parent training' and 'family/parent support' (Daly, 2013). For these and other reasons, it is important to identify the distinctiveness of parenting support *vis-à-vis* other services and concerns and probe what the spotlighting on parenting means. Faircloth *et al*. (2013: 1) are helpful in the latter regard, defining the focus on parenting as problematising the traditional assumptions surrounding childrearing by forcing a re-examination of the goals, resources and relationships that constitute an emerging global set of parameters for framing personhood in contemporary ways. In effect, the term 'parenting' connotes a focus on the 'doing' of parenthood, the quotidian practices and

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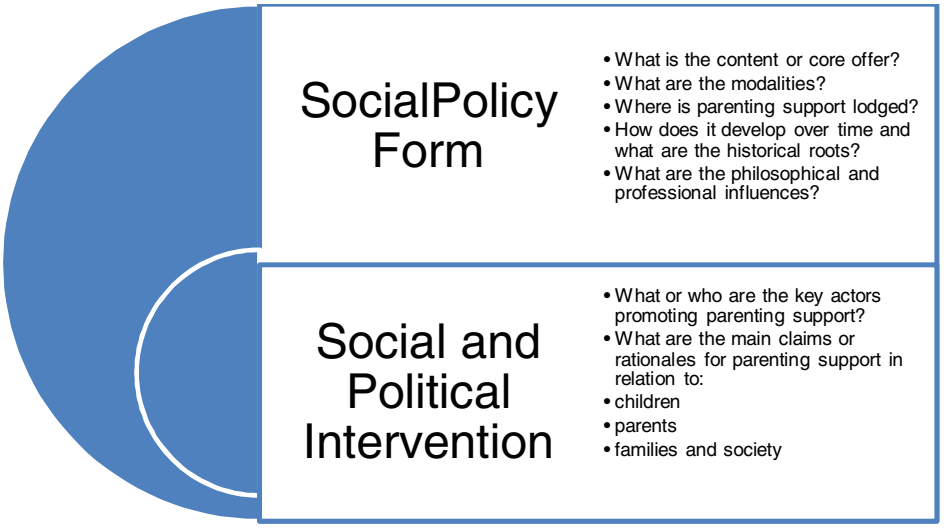

Figure 1. (Colour online) An analytical framework for parenting support

approaches whereby parents undertake the tasks and engage in the relationships involved in rearing children to adulthood. This helps to set the sociological context but how should we specify parenting support as a type of social policy? Drawing from Daly *et al*. (2015) I suggest the following:

> Parenting support is a set of (service and other) activities oriented to improving how parents approach and execute their role as parents and to increasing parents' child-rearing resources (including information, knowledge, skills and social support) and competencies.

What is being suggested, then, is that, as a field, parenting support aims to better equip parents for their child-rearing role by providing them with a range of resources. In this and other ways, parenting support views the relationship between parent and child primarily in functional terms. It is somewhat different to measures that, through a looser framing, could be regarded as parental support or support to parents in their own right, such as cash transfers for parents, for example, or employment leave for mothers and/or fathers which aim to confer either money and/or time. In comparison, parenting support as conceived here is more directly focused on the exercise or practice of parenting: the provision of resources (other than material support) including information/education, skills and various types of support which directly target parental orientations and practices. It will be obvious that I am using it as an umbrella term that encompasses a range of services.

The search after the constituent elements of the dual analytic framework, of parenting support as both social and an intervention of political and social import, is set out in question form in Figure 1.

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Interrogating parenting support as a form of social policy

We know, from the research undertaken by the PolChi project as well as from other sources (Lewis, 2011), that 'parenting support' is a shorthand term for a range of services. A series of analytical questions classic to social policy helps to divine the purpose and focus in practice.

A first question pertains to what is offered or 'given' to the parent. This places the spotlight on the type of service and what it aims to achieve. The PolChi project and other research indicate that parenting support measures primarily aim to impart some kind of resources to the parent participants. Such 'goods' appear to be of three main types: information, skills and social support. The informational function focuses on imparting information about what is considered good parental practice, especially in light of expert knowledge and emerging consensus about optimum child development, particularly if viewed through the likely effect of childhood circumstances on later life (Heckman and Masterov, 2007). When it is oriented to skills' development, parenting support also encompasses the presentation of information but it is envisaged to go further, to set up opportunities to enable reflection on the part of the parent on their own practice, and to pass on tips, techniques and skills for how to control and nurture children's behaviour. In a third idiom, the type of 'good' provided approximates more to the core meaning of 'support', such as peer support, or social support more broadly. Among the modalities here are mentoring, befriending and attempting to mobilise the 'own community' of the child, parents and/or family (should such exist). To take an example, in France parenting support is not directly focused on (re)educating parents but is conceived mainly as putting in place a network of peer support for parents in their child-rearing roles, including advice and support for how they should engage with the education system and other public services so as to enhance their children's social integration (Pioli, 2006; Martin, 2012, Martin, 2015). Sometimes a parenting support intervention or measure will seek to offer all of these, but typically there is a degree of specialisation involved.

This brings us to the modality of provision. From the available evidence, the following appear to be the three main modalities taken by parenting support:

- information and awareness raising – advice and information services (such as leaflets and information provided in websites), information campaigns, telephone helplines, web-based and other parenting courses and programmes;
- education and skills development – targeted parenting programmes, intensive interventions including case work to change beliefs, attitudes and self-perceptions;
- provision of social support – relationship and network building through social services, social work and other one-to-one aid, mentoring and befriending.

Looking across the five countries covered in this issue, the first is the most widespread but the second and the third modalities are also common.

The modality of the service is associated with key elements of access and provision. If the aim is to provide parents with general information, then the provision is more likely to be universalist as against targeted in orientation. When universalist, parenting support speaks to a concern about the general practice of parenting and the extent to which it is sufficiently 'appropriate' to the prevailing social conditions; when it is targeted, the intent is more likely to be to effect an intervention in the behaviour and culture of specific (groups of) parents. In the latter case, it is low-income and minority sectors of the population which

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are likely to be targeted. Another form of targeting centres on children, young people, parents and families classified as having certain problems or co-occurring problems, such as behavioural problems, being at risk of educational underachievement and so forth. Another aspect of the modality that is extremely telling is how people gain, or are given, access to parenting support. This refers not only to the fees or costs involved, but also to whether the provisions are demand or supply led, and the degree of compulsion for those attending or participating.

A further question is about where the policies and provisions are 'lodged' or located in the overall welfare state infrastructure and whether they are stand-alone interventions or linked to other provisions. It seems on the basis of the existing evidence that parenting support is rarely a completely stand-alone measure or policy. The evidence suggests that there are five main policy domains interlinking with (to various degrees in different settings) parenting support:

- children, youth and family services;
- child protection and the prevention of abuse;
- early childhood education;
- health;
- education.

The exact linkages have to be investigated in practice. But the general question of where parenting support is located within the policy landscape speaks to a broader one about a country's approach to family policy (and the welfare state more generally). Historically, family policy has had two core components: cash transfers and services. The emphasis and degree of priority of each varies across time and place. But there is a strong trend now towards services for families, and in some countries this is serving to downgrade cash transfers (for example, England). The exact reasons for this trend vary; it may be representative of a preference for policies that are more behaviouralist in orientation (Standing, 2011), or it may be associated with a concern about how cash transfers affect work incentives. There is evidence of both considerations in the PolChi data. The issues need to be investigated in practice and can be taken forward by questioning the extent to which the move into parenting support may be associated with changes in the nature of the welfare state itself.

When thinking of adjacent or encompassing policy domains, it is important, especially from a global perspective, not to rule out cash transfers as a modality of parenting support. This is especially the case when family policy is taking new forms, such as conditional cash transfers which combine cash with conditions around child-rearing (United Nations, 2012: 4). Such transfers make direct financial assistance to households or families dependent on their meeting prescriptions around service utilisation, which in most countries relate to school attendance and/or health-related progress on the part of the child or indeed the parent's attendance at a parenting programme. Hence, conditional cash transfers are intended to influence the practice of parenting and parental behaviour in a very direct manner and so may constitute a pillar of parenting support policy. Our earlier point to the effect that (unconditional) cash transfers should not be seen as a form of parenting support still stands though.

Examining how parenting support policy unfolds over time and is rooted in past developments is also very important. The different articles, but especially those on France, Germany and Sweden, show that parenting support today is connected to

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past developments by a long thread. The analytic question to be posed here is how contemporary developments are to be seen and understood within the longer tradition of public responsibility and contestations around childbirth and the health of the new mother and baby. A tradition of parental advice, especially with regard to the health and development of babies and toddlers, is part of the welfare state architecture in most of the highly developed countries (as are the classic child protection/child welfare functions). Ostner and Stolberg's (2015) article on Germany shows that institutions such as mothers' centres and family-education sites have been around for decades in that country. Historically, parenting services were predominantly support measures for poor mothers and babies, and were oriented to issues of public health and public order. The article on France makes reference to *l'ecoles des parents* which represent a different tradition. They were developed in the 1930s to teach parents how to educate and instruct each other in relation to family life. One of the benefits of locating contemporary developments in a historical trajectory is that it allows one to pose questions around what has changed. To what extent, for example, are the measures being put in place now taking parenting support beyond health, beyond babies, and beyond professionals giving parents information and advice about their baby and toddler? The notion that the state should be active in offering parents of older children 'support' as their children develop may be something quite different to more long-standing ideas of child welfare and maternal health, as Daly and Bray (2015) suggest in their article on developments in England.

A further set of penetrating questions relates to the philosophical affinities or orientations of the provisions. The existing literature suggests that parenting support is eclectic philosophically, and can potentially draw from a wide set of underlying approaches and ideas and be offered by people with very different professional backgrounds. The relevant theories and concepts usually cited in the literature as influential in parenting support include: attachment theory which emphasises the importance of secure attachment to responsive caregivers in the early years of a child's life (Bowlby, 1969), and the ecological theory of human development which, following Bronfenbrenner (1979), holds that interactions with others in a range of environments are necessary for human development. Parenting support also has other theoretical roots (Lucas, 2011). Boddy *et al*. (2009) emphasise parenting support's orientation towards social learning theory (which, based on the work of Bandura (1977), holds that children learn in social contexts from observing the behaviour of others). These authors also highlight the influence of what they call 'emancipatory approaches' (which aim for parental empowerment and generally work on a partnership basis with parents). One should also add cognitive behaviour therapy as an influence on parenting support; it aims to change the way people interpret and respond to others' behaviour (Richter and Naicker, 2013). The extent to which an intervention draws on one or more of these roots, and also the degree of fidelity to a particular approach, will affect the aim and intention of the intervention and also the likely form and impact.

The philosophical or theoretical underpinnings will also serve to reveal the dominant professional orientation. Among the professions that are known to shape parenting support are psychology, education/pedagogy and social work. The extent to which different professions are involved in practice is something that the research project underpinning this themed issue shows to vary widely. Some countries tend to regard parenting support as the province of professionals. For example, in the Netherlands parenting support is delivered by pedagogues and/or people trained in social work or youth work. The degree

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of professionalisation of parenting support is less in England, especially because parenting programmes, which can be delivered by people with relatively little training, have been so predominant there. This matter, also dovetails with another question around which interests are associated with and promoting parenting support. This takes us to the second plane of analysis.

Interrogating parenting support as socially and politically contentious

In order to develop explanations for the nature and growth of parenting support, it is vital to identify the actors involved and also the kind of 'problems' that parenting support is intended or claimed to address.

Key actors in parenting support

One can expect a range of political actors to be promoting parenting support for it seems to appeal across the political spectrum with governments of different political orientations persuaded by it. In the case of England, for example, Labour came to power in 1997 convinced of the importance of a 'good childhood', and the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government (2010–2015) also endorsed parenting support as a policy (albeit for different reasons and with a different vision to that of Labour). In both the Netherlands and Sweden also, there is evidence also of the appeal of parenting support to governments of different political persuasion. But the fact that parenting support has been implemented across borders and by governments of differing political persuasions suggests that we must look also to the influence of other political actors to explain its rapid growth.

The international bodies, such as the EU, the Council of Europe and the UN, are pushing strongly for parenting support. Both the Council of Europe and the UN, for example, have used the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child as the template against which to develop and promote a policy on parenting. In the case of the EU, which has no legal mandate in relation to families and children, both the EU 2020 Strategy and the Commission Recommendation on Investing in Children of 2013 call for investments in policies and programmes (including parenting support) that promote early engagement and underline the vital role of parents and families in children's early development (European Commission, 2013).

Another possible core set of actors is the academic and quasi-academic research community. While in theory the academic community could be involved either directly or indirectly, only a subset is likely to be directly involved in promoting parenting support. These include especially academics who have developed programmes or policy prescriptions, for example. The programmes Incredible Years, Triple P and Families and Schools Together were all developed by academics. But taken as a whole members of the academic community are more likely to exert an indirect influence on the growth of parenting support, especially in the extent to which they undertake and disseminate research and promote particular methods or methodologies. The Swedish case shows that at least part of the reframing of parenting support in that country has been driven forward by powerful actors, such as experts and academics working in governmental commissions, who were instrumental in introducing new discourses on the autonomous and competent parent. Other academic discourses have been powerful also, and seem

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to have resonance in all of the five countries. These include especially the set of ideas emanating from medical science and developmental psychology, behavioural psychology and more recently neuroscience around the significance of early childhood and parenting practices for later life (O'Connor and Scott, 2007).

Parents and children or young people should be considered as potentially important actors in parenting support also. Parents especially may voice or act upon a perceived need for parenting support. Sites like Mumsnet[1] can be taken as evidence of a desire on the part of parents for more information, guidance and sharing of experiences (although they are not 'pure' or reliable expressions of parental will or need). The extent to which the developments in parenting support are demand or supply led is a question that has to be posed in its own right. It can be partially investigated by considering the conditions around access and participation underpinning provision (as suggested earlier) but it must be contextualised more widely in terms of the extent to which the needs of parents and children as against other (f)actors are precipitating parenting support. Professional groups or individuals, market-based actors, employers and NGOs are also among other potential or actual actors associated with the growth and implementation of parenting support. Each potentially has interests invested in the provisions.

The intentions involved in parenting support, and by implication the social consequences that are aimed for, form another component of the social and political underpinnings of parenting support. To understand these, one has to look closely at the claims made for parenting support and the kind of projects that such claims take forward.

Rationales, aims and justifications of parenting support

When one searches explicitly for rationales, it becomes obvious that parenting support is taking forward numerous goals within and across national contexts. It is helpful in this regard to differentiate between goals relating to children, parents and societies (the latter focused around family and community). These are, of course, inter-linked in practice and can be separated only for the purposes of research and analysis.

In relation to children, two main child-related rationales may be found in parenting support. One is associated with the move towards children's rights. This move is inspired by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which is generally credited with introducing a paradigm shift: from family as a collective entity governed by parental authority to a view of family as vital for both the nurturing of children and parents as agents in the realisation of rights for children. If the Convention 'invented' a new understanding of children as agents with rights, it also contributed to a new view of parent, emphasising not the status necessarily, but parental agency and responsibility in protecting and furthering the child's best interests. Knijn and Hopman's (2015) article on the Netherlands emphasises 'responsibilisation' as a major axis for reform of social and family services. Parental agency is foregrounded. This is a universalist type of discourse in some ways, and can be counterposed to a second child-related rationale which is around ameliorating child-related risks, as well as those of adolescents. The nature of the risks targeted may vary, from generalised risks associated with poverty and inequality to more specific risks such as those stemming from child abandonment, violence and maltreatment. There are different strands of thought feeding into a focus on child/adolescent risk. First, some contemporary scientific and public discourse, especially in a context of a risk culture, constructs parents as a risk to their children's development

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(Furedi, 2008). The country case studies make clear that this kind of thinking has traction in England, France, Germany and Sweden, although a different discourse prevails in the Netherlands. Second, in a possible contradistinction to the first representation, parenting behaviour (and by implication parenting support) may take forward a more optimistic project around the rearing of children. This is underpinned by the view that if parents are informed about the benefits of particular approaches and emerging knowledge about the impact of parenting and other practices that nurture children's development and control their negative habits and impulses, then risk can be ameliorated or prevented (Heckman and Masterov, 2007; Havnes and Mogstad, 2011; *inter alia*). Whatever the source of the risk, parenting support needs to be interrogated for the underlying thrust toward universalistic versus targeted measures.

Turning to rationales regarding parents, there are two contrasting positions here also. One possible justification focuses on parental competence. This links into the view of parenthood and parenting as a demanding if not specialised activity, especially in the context of today's rapidly changing world. Parenting is, therefore, seen to require particular skills and dispositions. In some scientific research, for example, particular forms of the parent–child relationship and engagement are depicted as a mode of transmission for factors that heighten or reduce risks around the child's chances of development and achievement (for example, Rogoff and Lave, 1984). This has taken hold in notions of 'good parenting' which are widely (if often uncritically) promoted (Ramaekers and Suissa, 2011). However, the extent to which these and other parenting-related interventions focus in practice on a particular group of parents is again an important undercurrent that needs to be investigated. As mentioned there is the potential in parenting support for both universalistic and particularistic approaches. The evidence available suggests that many of the interventions in the different countries considered (and certainly the most interventionist of them) are directed towards low-income parents and families, as well as those who can be considered 'minority' in some way. For this and other reasons, it is vitally important to study the experiences and hear the voices of parents. A second, and related, parent-relevant rationale may be to enlist parents in their children's development. Research on early child development is again significant here, underlining the need for sensitive responses on the part of parents to their infants and older children and the importance of (re-)creating the home as a locus of stimulation and learning as well as a place where children are or should be protected. This leads to a (more benign) justification for parenting support as a way of making parents aware of the latest thinking around how their child develops and how to optimise their child's progress. We should enquire empirically therefore into the extent to which parenting support measures aim to enlist parents as 'supporters' and 'enablers' of their children's development.

When it comes to society and societal functioning more broadly, parenting support could potentially relate to familial functioning, promoting and protecting family as an institution and way of life and seeking to effect social integration more broadly.

Parenting support seems to be everywhere grounded in a familial context, although it is not always confined to a particular family type. Set against a backdrop of increasing pressures on family and widespread social change, parenting support may be turned to by decision makers to buttress and support familial practices. There may be structural elements involved, parenting support could be claimed to have a role in addressing a falling fertility rate – there are resonances of this in some of the five countries studied – or in ameliorating the negative impact of economic changes such as migration and/or

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emigration on patterns of child-rearing and family life. A wider rationale may promote parenting support as an antidote to anti-social behaviour and youth violence. This has become a growing concern in public debate, and also at policy level, as young people (especially) are seen to engage more in aggressive behaviours and to be more resistant to parental and other forms of discipline. This concern is often elevated by negative media portrayals of contemporary youth culture, not to mention talk of 'generational conflicts' (White, 2013). All of this highlights the 'stretchiness' of the concept and practice of parenting support and its significance in addressing 'socially created problems' and 'problem families'.

Conclusion

I have sought in this article to develop a framework to analyse and understand the emergence of parenting support as both a form of social policy provision and a measure that has the potential to intervene more broadly in politics and society. To do so, I have relied on the results of the PolChi project in general and the five country case studies presented in earlier articles, as well as other research. These all remind us of the need for a framework that can encompass variation. Hence, as a social policy measure, parenting support lends itself to an analysis which explores: the nature of the offer or 'good' being made to parents, the form and modality of provision, conditions of access and operation, the location of the provision in the policy landscape and its linkages to other policies, the unfolding of the policy over time and historical roots, philosophical underpinnings and dominant professional influences. In a second vein, the analytic framework emphasises the social and political roots and orientations. These can be investigated on the one hand by identifying the main actors involved in parenting support, and on the other by the rationales taken forward by parenting support as a policy (relating to children, to parents and to families and community life).

The framework and the questions it raises serve to deepen the search for an explanation for the growth of parenting support (and in some cases its reinvention). The literature has already considered this and the conclusion appears to be that parenting support represents primarily an intrusion by the state into private life and a more intense engagement on the part of the state with the conduct of family life. This seems undoubted. But some scholars go further, seeing parenting support as oriented primarily to the regulation and control of low-income parents. Val Gillies (2008, 2011), for example, suggests that it is a way of controlling and correcting the behaviours of poor mothers and fathers, whereas Hey and Bradford (2006) view the measures as a continuation of the regulation of motherhood. There is some truth in these claims, and a framework of social control does have value for the analysis of parenting support. However, viewing parenting support as primarily a form of control is too sweeping. When one comprehends parenting support as complex, and contextualises it in broader policy and political considerations as the framework developed here tries to do, and also when one takes account of both the variation that exists in practice and the generic orientation of much parenting support, it seems reasonable to see parenting support as multi-dimensional and having the capacity to play host to varying objectives.

But there is no doubt that the field is riven with tensions and aspirations (or claims) that are potentially in conflict with each other. On the one hand, the goal might be better to equip all parents for the challenges associated with parenting, to increase their confidence

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in the role and give them a set of resources to call on when they are experiencing difficulties. On the other hand, measures and programmes may and do seek actively to change particular parental behaviours, and in this and other ways can represent an imposition on parents by projects that are developed elsewhere and carry controlling interests. As the policy continues to be rolled out and parenting support becomes more established as a field of social policy, more critical research is vital. We need to investigate the political and social implications of parenting support, and especially how the series of profound tensions that are involved in it are worked out in practice: between voluntarism and compulsion, between 'support' and 'intervention', and between support as needs led or service led. We also need to continue to enquire into the relationship between parenting support and other approaches to family policy and social policy more broadly.

Notes

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