

Introduction

Parenting Support in European Countries: A Complex Development in Social Policy

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This themed section focuses on parenting support as a social policy phenomenon within and across five European countries. The provisions involved include: information to parents about parenting and child-rearing (through helplines and websites as well as face-to-face services), organised parenting classes or programmes, one-to-one counselling and intensive work around parenting behaviours in ‘troubled families’, professional and non-professional networks and service provision oriented to reduce social isolation and increase social integration (especially among ‘minority’ sections of the population). Why are these developments interesting and why do they merit a themed section? There are numerous answers to this question. In the first instance, these measures are an interesting instance of social policy’s increasing interest in what happens between parents and their children. Secondly, studying parenting support helps to reveal fundamental contestations between state and society with regard to the management of personal life and the governance of family. Thirdly, analysing developments helps to explore emerging specialist areas of social policy and how these tie in with public and political constructions of ‘social problems’.

In reviewing developments in five countries (England, Germany, France, the Netherlands and Sweden), the themed section is organised around the following questions:

- What policy measures are involved in parenting support, and how and why do these vary across countries?
- What (if anything) is new in parenting support as a form of child and family policy, but also with regard to historical patterns of engagement with healthy child-rearing, proper parenting and functional family life?
- Why are policy makers within and across countries so interested in parenting support now?
- What political issues are involved, and what are the likely consequences of developments?

The articles draw upon new empirical evidence of a five-country study, funded under the ORA (Open Research Area) programme, a collaboration among national European funding bodies in the social sciences.¹ Entitled ‘Governing New Social Risks: The Case of Recent Child Policies in European Welfare States’, and colloquially known as ‘PolChi’, the project investigated and compared the meaning and modalities of parenting support

across four countries: France, Germany, the Netherlands and the UK. Research on Sweden was also included, although this was not funded by the project. The empirical work undertaken was of three types: an analysis of available statistical evidence; interviews with practitioners, experts and decision makers; and analysis of policies and their roll-out nationally and locally. The aim was to trace developments and identify national and trans-national trajectories from a comparative European perspective, as well as to ascertain the views and experiences of those involved in research, planning and delivery.

Investigating relevant developments across the five countries between the mid-1990s and the present day, interviews and focus groups, as well as case study analysis of particular interventions and analysis of policy documents, have been employed to produce new evidence on how parenting support is planned, legitimated and operates on the ground. The five empirical chapters present this new information, from high-level decision makers, experts and practitioners, for each country.

The articles that follow aim collectively to make a number of contributions. First, they combine to reveal the structure and form of parenting support *qua* social policy, but especially as a service offered to people in everyday life. They therefore reveal key elements of parenting support in practice. This is an important contribution in a context where we know far too little generally about what services are actually delivered to people in their everyday lives, and how these are changing. Even in welfare state studies today, most of the research and theorising is still based on the study of cash transfers rather than services. Secondly, the themed section interrogates the developments through a critical lens. In this regard, the pieces locate parenting support in relation to a number of major orientations: the continued development of social policy focused on the well-being and development of children and its implications; the governance of parents and families; the contestations between different professional bodies of knowledge and the move to evidence-based interventions. Thirdly, the comparative orientation allows us to engage with a broader set of issues still. These include questions relating to general trajectories of social policy development in Europe and whether countries are moving along similar or different paths. The countries chosen represent some of the main systemic variations not just in policy approaches to children and family, but indeed in the welfare state form itself. But more particularly, all of these countries have seen significant developments around parenting support and they are marked by both similarities and differences in the exact nature of the policy response and the driving factors. Because it is designed to explore and explain these variations, the entire themed section therefore will contribute to scholarship in the broader comparative welfare state field.

The themed issue and the individual articles are also informed by an interdisciplinary perspective, with insights not just from social policy but also sociology and political science. The main emphasis and interest is to draw out parenting support as a form of social policy and as a type of governance of 'private life'. This intention grounds each of the contributions in two common endeavours. First, the developments around parenting support are interrogated in terms of some of the classic analytical categories of social policy: the cash vs service nature of the interventions, the dominant professional ethos, the role of evidence (and evidence-based interventions), whether the provisions are universal or targeted, the national versus local dimensions and the struggle or balance between autonomy and control (in this case of parents). The second endeavour is to critically examine parenting support in terms of the drivers associated with it and to reveal the political interests underlying it. Overall, the pieces individually and collectively address

the question of whether parenting support is a new way of framing and targeting existing policy and resources, or whether it represents an addition to the field of family and child policies.

The themed section is organised as follows. Each of the country cases is outlined and analysed in succession, beginning with England and then progressing successively through France, Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden. The final article focuses on conceptualising and analysing parenting support as a domain of social policy. In it Daly develops an analytic framework for parenting support which treats it as both a form of social policy and a measure that intervenes more broadly in politics and society. The underlying insight is that parenting support varies in terms of the forms it takes but also in whether the underlying objectives are 'supportive' or 'controlling' of families. Rather than a summary of the main findings this article attempts to move beyond them to offer a framework of analysis that can be applied in different settings. An outline of key resources in parenting support is also presented.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Rachel Bray for some editorial assistance in preparing the final drafts of the country chapters.

Note

1 See <http://www.uni-goettingen.de/en/213091.html>. The English part of the research was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ES/I014861/2).