

# Introduction

## Families, Social Work and the Welfare State: Where Contemporary ‘Family’ Meets Policy and Practice

Julie Walsh\* and Will Mason\*\*

\*Department of Sociological Studies, University of Sheffield  
E-mail: [j.c.walsh@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:j.c.walsh@sheffield.ac.uk)

\*\*Sheffield Methods Institute, University of Sheffield  
E-mail: [w.j.mason@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:w.j.mason@sheffield.ac.uk)

---

### Introduction

This themed section brings together the disciplines of sociology, social work and social policy in order to examine the ways in which contemporary familial diversity is recognised in comparative welfare state regimes. Contributors interrogate the ways in which such diversity is supported in national legislation, policy developments and acknowledged in everyday social work practice. In doing so, the section examines if and how these demographic trends and sociological conceptualisations are reflected in comparative welfare state systems and/or policy related to family. Selected articles will also consider if and how social workers, as ‘street level bureaucrats’ (Lipsky, 1980), incorporate these changes in familial structures, and related policy, into their decision making processes and everyday practice.

‘The family’ continues to influence political agendas and, as noted by Cheal (2008), governments consistently pass and implement policies designed to meet the needs of families. For Kapella *et al.* (2010) and Kuronen (2010), the fundamental idea of the ‘nuclear family’ as the model for the design of welfare support systems is successively being replaced by these new and alternative family forms and lifestyles. This, however, poses challenges for welfare systems and social workers around the world, because welfare states encounter these trends in different ways. Further, the settlement between families and the state differs across nations and comparative research on family policies indicates a variation in how welfare programmes are designed in relation to the family as an institution (Hantrais, 2004). Such differences include: who is considered socially responsible for the care of family members; who is defined as ‘the family’ in legislation; which family members are the most deserving of state support; and levels of resource governments commit to providing services to support ‘the family’, and/or individual ‘family’ members.

Comparative social policy and social work is heavily influenced by Esping-Andersen’s typology of welfare states, introduced in *Three worlds of Welfare Capitalism* (1990). In subsequent years, feminist critiques have, however, developed a more refined model which takes into account gendered caring responsibilities; the concept of defamilialisation, for example, focuses on family policy, and the role welfare states can have in releasing families from the burden of supporting and caring for family members

(Bambra, 2007). Hantrais (2004) develops this further and suggests a categorisation with four 'regimes': defamilialised, partly familialised, familialised, and refamilialised types of welfare states. These regimes reflect different ways to mix social service provision with family responsibilities, leading to highly variable consequences in terms of the role of the family, but also in terms of resource distribution and who is entitled to state support as family members. Within these systems, social workers deal directly with complex family situations, and are required to make practice decisions regarding familial eligibility to support, levels of support required, and to which services families require referral (Dunér and Nordström, 2006). Social workers also operate within a welfare mix of different public, private and for-profit/non-profit organisations. Within this complex environment how social workers conceptualise contemporary family impacts on how they engage with recipients of state services.

Overall, this themed section draws together international experts in sociology, social policy and social work to examine the relationship between: globalising forces; national policy implementation; structural contexts and constraints; demographic change; and how these impact on individual everyday practice. In doing so, a detailed commentary on, and assessment of the usefulness of Hantrais' and others' typologies, is also offered. By collating analyses that span nine countries, across two continents, the section provides a uniquely international contribution by connecting conceptual developments with practical realities.

Contributors to the themed section draw on data from two international, comparative research projects, both concerned with the relationship between policy and social work practice. The first is the Nuffield funded Child Welfare Inequalities project (CWIP). This large scale comparative study explored the relationship between deprivation and child welfare intervention rates across the four UK nations ([www.coventry.ac.uk/cwip](http://www.coventry.ac.uk/cwip)). The second project on which contributors draw is the NORFACE funded, Family Complexity and Social Work project (FaCSK) (<https://welfarestatefutures.org/research-network/facsk-family-complexity-and-social-work-a-comparative-study-of-family-based-welfare-work-in-different-welfare-regimes/>). The premise of this project was to compare the impact of policy on social work practice in eight countries, representing four comparable welfare state systems: familialised (Chile and Mexico); defamilialised (Norway and Sweden); refamilialised (Lithuania and Bulgaria); and partly familialised (UK and Republic of Ireland). Within this, the impact of such policy on different service areas was also examined. By drawing on data gathered in these two studies, four key themes are explored:

- The ways in which family is conceptualised in different national contexts, for example, legislative definitions and expectations of extended kinship networks.
- Cross national variations in what is seen to be acceptable levels of state intervention into 'family life'.
- The usefulness and limitations of welfare regime typologies in understanding cross national practice contexts in relation to families.
- The extent to which macro, meso and micro level influences impact on the ways in which social workers engage with and understand families.

In the opening review article, Walsh and Mason (2018) report findings from both the FACSCK and CWIP studies. The authors show how, in the UK context, diversity in family forms is, to some extent, reflected in government policy and social work practice guidance.

Whilst, when prompted, social workers' accounts recognise both family complexity and diversity of familial constructs, the authors conclude that myriad constraints complicate the application of these policies. By locating and critically engaging with these constraints, the article highlights both the limitations of policy and the barriers social workers negotiate, when working with limited resources.

In the second article of the section, McCartan *et al.* (2018) explore conceptions of 'family' beyond the nuclear and critically engage with whom the state recognises as responsible for care. This article presents variations in child placement types across four UK nations. In doing so the authors explore some of the cultural, socio-economic and political concepts of family and provide context for reliance on formal and informal kinship care arrangements across the UK. The article concludes by arguing that there is a need for the state to recognise, in their resourcing decisions, the burden placed on extended families in the context of kinship care arrangements.

Studsrød *et al.* (2018) present empirical data from comparative welfare states: Chile, Mexico (familialised) and Norway (defamilialised). In doing so, they explore the ways in which social workers across these countries conceptualise family and how this reflects in practice. They draw on empirical data to evidence an overarching broadening of family definitions internationally, whilst also reporting some differences. Notably an exposition of how social workers view the relationships between families and the state is offered, alongside consideration of the impact of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) for decision-making.

K. Nygren *et al.* (2018) examine the conceptualisation of family in key social legislative documents guiding social workers in two European countries representing two different welfare regimes: Sweden (defamilialised) and Lithuania (refamilialised). They focus on the concept of family, delineated on three legislative levels: the constitutional level, the general family policy level, and the child welfare policy level. They show that 'family' is referenced explicitly in Lithuanian law, and that the role of 'family' is central in social work practice, while this is less so in Swedish law. The analysis reveals how general welfare systems are linked to legislative frameworks that, in turn, provide fundamentally different conditions for social work in different contexts.

Finally, L. Nygren *et al.* (2018) consider the relevance and utility of welfare typologies for the study of professional sense making. They argue that regime types tend to amplify difference at the level of the nation state, obscuring regional variations and common factors at work in an international context of resource rationing, targeting of interventions and child centric 'social investment state' policies. Rather, there are broader influences at play, which are obscured by the narrow focus of regime typologies. Global powers, such as the World Bank, thereby, also influence a shared normative reasoning about what is acceptable, or not. The article concludes that regime typologies are a useful but relatively blunt instrument. By offering this critique, the article both extends and contributes to our understanding of welfare types.

The combined articles examine the operation of family policy in nine national contexts, and do so from a range of disciplinary perspectives. Overall, the section provides an empirical base from which to understand whether, and to what extent, international and national level policy directives influence social work practice. Further, drawing on data from two large scale projects, this collection of papers progresses interdisciplinary understandings of the relationship between policy and practice in the context of changing family dynamics.

## References

- Bambra, C. (2007) 'Defamilialisation and welfare state regimes: a cluster analysis', *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 16, 326–38.
- Cheal, D. (2008) *Families in Today's World*, UK: Routledge.
- Dunér, A. and Nordström, M. (2006) 'The discretion and power of street-level bureaucrats', *European Journal of Social Work*, 9, 4, 425–44.
- Esping-Anderson, G. (1990) *Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*, Bristol: Policy Press.
- Hantrias, L. (2004) *Family Policy Matter: Responding to Family Change in Europe*, Bristol: The Policy Press.
- Kapella, O., Rille-Pfeiffer, C., Rupp, M. and Schneider, N. F. (eds.) (2010) *Family Diversity*, Opladen and Farmington Hills: Barbara Budrich Publishers.
- Kuronen, M. (2010) *Research on Family and Family Policies in Europe: State of the Art*, Jyväskylä: Family Research Centre: Jyväskylä University.
- Lipsky, M. (1980) *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services*, New York: The Russell Sage Foundation.
- McCartan, C., Bunting, L., Bywaters, P., Davidson, G., Elliott, M. and Hooper, J. (2018) 'A four-nation comparison of kinship care in the UK: the relationship between formal kinship care and deprivation', *Social Policy and Society*, doi: [10.1017/S1474746418000179](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746418000179).
- Nygren, K., Naujanienė, R. and Nygren, L. (2018) 'The notion of family in Lithuanian and Swedish social legislation', *Social Policy and Society*, doi: [10.1017/S1474746418000192](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746418000192).
- Nygren, L., White, S. and Ellingsen, I. T. (2018) 'Investigating welfare regime typologies: paradoxes, pitfalls and potentialities in comparative social work research', *Social Policy and Society*, doi: [10.1017/S1474746418000167](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746418000167).
- Studsrød, I., Ellingsen, I. T., Muñoz Guzmán, C. and Mancinas Espinoza, S. E. (2018) 'Conceptualisations of family and social work family practice in Chile, Mexico and Norway', *Social Policy and Society*, doi: [10.1017/S1474746418000234](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746418000234).
- United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) <https://www.unicef.org.uk/what-we-do/un-convention-child-rights/> [accessed 06.06.2018].
- Walsh, J. and Mason, W. (2018) 'Walking the walk: changing familial forms, government policy and everyday social work practice in England', *Social Policy and Society*, doi: [10.1017/S1474746418000209](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746418000209).