



UiO : **University of Oslo**

Family policy, fertility and institutional trust

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- Research literature on relationship family policy and fertility weak, is inconclusive/contradictory
- ‘Standard’ framework for studying family policy impact based on cost-benefit ‘incentive thinking’, attempting to isolate ‘pure’ causal effects
- Need for complementary approaches that can shed on light on *how* family policy impact works
- This study: Emphasis on the systemic properties of policies, *institutional trust*, i.e. trust in the welfare state
- Need to study people’s *perceptions* of policies: The extent to which and how trust in the family policy system is expressed in young adults’ reasoning about having children in Norway
- The talk is based on A.L. Ellingsæter & E. Pedersen (2015) ‘Institutional trust: Family policy and fertility in Norway, *Social Politics*, doi:10.1093/sp/jxv003)

Beyond cost-benefit rationales

- Main assumption: Processes are not strictly individual, but social and structural
- Material resources and ideational/cognitive structures are *mutually constitutive*
- Perceptions of resources are filtered through *cultural schemas*, i.e. context dependent conceptual structures of interpretation, often taken for granted ways of perceiving and acting
- Focus: the processes through which policy alternatives become meaningful alternatives

On institutional trust and the welfare state

Three dimensions:

- **Reliance** on institutions in everyday life
- Trust in institutions based on **expectations** (predictive and normative)
- Trust does not depend on detailed **information**; good institutions relieve trusters from reducing insecurity from their own investigations
- **Social trust**: thin or impersonal trust – in strangers/acquaintances
- Linkages between institutional trust and social trust

A note on Norway context

- Stable fertility levels past couple of decades; small educational differences, increase in fertility among highly educated women
- Gradually improving family policy system: About one year of **paid parental leave**, low threshold. Right to a **childcare place** (from age 1), affordable maximum fee. **Cash for care benefit for 1-2 year olds** (after 2012 only 1 years olds) not using childcare services
- Children considered a 'public good', children culturally very desirable
- High employment rates, also among mothers. Low unemployment, material well-being

A note on the material

- 90 semi-structured interviews with 25-35 year olds in Oslo and Trondheim in 2010; including women and men, working class and upper middle class informants, and informants with and without children. class and parental status
- Data collected for the project: *The Social Meaning of Children: Reproductive Choice, Gender and Social Class* (book published by Routledge 2013)
- Analysis of questions dealing with the importance of family policies for having children

ROUTLEDGE/EUROPEAN SOCIOLOGICAL
ASSOCIATION STUDIES IN EUROPEAN SOCIETIES

The Social Meaning of
Children and Fertility Change
in Europe

Edited by
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Main findings: Virtuous circles of trust

- Trust in the family policy system permeates young adults reasoning about having children. They take the family policy system for granted and trust that it will work out
- Institutional trust is mediated by high levels of social trust – creating virtuous circles where the two forms of trust are mutually enforced

Reliance

- Having children based on the dual earner model
- Paid parental leave and kindergartens main arrangements; not perceived as ‘incentives’ to be chosen from; rather taken for granted
- High trust in quality of childcare institutions: one year at home self-evident norm (for women), kindergartens highly regarded. Cash for care benefit not important
- Underlying cognitive assumptions about children’s needs and appropriate care resonate closely with policy set-up

- I have always wanted to have [my child] in kindergarten, I could not imagine to have [my child] with a nanny (Woman, working class, children).
- We are so pleased with those working in the kindergarten, and the kindergarten. It's a very safe place (Man, working class, children).
- Without a place in kindergarten, I would have had to stay at home. Or use private childcare, but I would not have liked that at all (Woman, upper middle class, no children).
- Kindergarten, I'm very enthusiastic about it. I think it's great, for both parents and children [...] I've seen it as something you can lean on (Man, upper middle class, no children).

Expectations

- Family policy system associated with predictability
- Security (*trygghet*) key notion
- Policies reduce risks related to having children
- System highly appreciated, reflecting high level of social trust
- Policies are taken for granted

- Interviewer: What about the fact that we have [full] childcare coverage and paid parental leave?
- Interviewee: Yes, that's great. I think it's a luxury that we take for granted really. I don't think everybody else has it, around the world...So one is generally extremely lucky in this country...But you take it for granted, I think.
- Interviewer: No...So it does not have much of an effect because we don't think about...
- Interviewee: No, at least I don't...we just, we know we get it, and we expect it also, really.
- Interviewer: Yes. So one calculates it into one's plan to have children anyway...
- Interviewee: Yes, one knows that it is there, in any case.
- (Man, working class, children)

Information

- Many enter parenthood without detailed information of policies
- Information sought **after** pregnancy is a fact or after the child is born
- Lack of explicit consideration implies trust in the policy system
- Women more knowledge than men; having children more consequential for women
- Institutional trust most decisive for women's transition to parenthood

- Sure the [policies] are important, even if I didn't think much about it [before I had children] (Woman, working class, children).
- [Policies] were not important for me having children, but they were important afterwards, to manage everyday life. If the arrangements hadn't been there I don't know what I would have thought or planned, but they were there so... (Woman, upper middle class, children).
- [...] for my own part I don't think I would have begun to think about such things until after I eventually have had a kid (Man, working class, no children).
- [Policies] has had very little influence on the rumination about having children or not, that is, it has not entered our discussions at all. It follows afterwards, I think. Again a little of this luxury attitude...it's going to be alright (Man, upper middle class, no children)