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 polices: The extent to which and how trust in the family policy system is expressed in young adults’ reasoning about having children in Norway

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 employement 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, and parental status.
- Analysis of questions dealing with the importance of family policies for having children.
The Social Meaning of Children and Fertility Change in Europe

Edited by
Anne Lise Ellingsæter,
An-Magritt Jensen and Merete Lie
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)