

Van Lancker, Wim; Zagel, Hannah

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## Family policy research in Europe

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### 3. Family policy research in Europe

**Wim Van Lancker and Hannah Zagel**

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#### INTRODUCTION

Family policy has gained attention as an independent field of study since the 1970s (Gauthier & Koops, 2018). In the context of profound changes in labour markets, family structures, and gender arrangements, powerful narratives emerged, for example, about the need to boost women's labour market participation and to support children as human capital 'repositories' of future economic prosperity (Lister, 1994, 2006; Jenson, 2004). Family policies have increasingly been seen as instrumental for approaching such goals among other policy domains (Lewis, 2006). Family policy research has monitored and made sense of the developments in family policy and its outcomes (Daly, 2020). In this role, the field of family policy research itself has undergone large changes since its early days.

Family policy scholarship is diverse and rich. Researchers working in various disciplines contribute to family policy research, such as from sociology, political sciences, social work, economics, educational science, law, and public health. This diversity even applies to sub-strands within the field such as comparative family policy research, which is the focus of this chapter. Comparative family policy research is an established branch in the ESPAnet community since its inaugural conference in 2002 (Clasen & Kvist, 2021). It has strong routes in the welfare regime typologizing tradition, and in its feminist critique.

There is no general consensus about what the boundaries of family policy research are, which is arguably due to the nature of family policy as a policy area. Measures commonly considered 'family policy' cut across different policy fields such as labour market and social security policies, education, family law, and housing policies. In their pioneering 1978 work, Sheila Kamerman and Alfred Kahn distinguished between explicit and implicit family policies, the latter referring to all policy domains and decisions that have consequences for families with children. Indeed, it is sometimes said that the subject of family policy is less defined by the type of policy, but more by its virtue of intervening in family life (Kaufmann et al., 2002). A more concise

definition views family policy ‘as centered around the well-being, functioning and responsibilities of families with children’ (Daly, 2020: 27). Comparative family policy research arguably converges in the analysis of a core of three areas of family policy: income supports to families (money), childcare (services), and parental leave rights (time).

In this chapter, we look back on the trajectory of ‘the field’ of family policy research roughly from the 1970s, map its current state (from 2003), and finally lay out emerging topics and those likely to occupy family policy research in the future. We take stock of these developments addressing four key questions: (1) Which family policy outcomes are studied? (2) Which policies are analysed? (3) What are the dominant methods? (4) What are the theoretical perspectives in family policy research in the respective periods?

## CURRENT RESEARCH AGENDA

Looking at the period from the inaugural ESPAnet conference in 2002 until 2021, the agenda in family policy research is increasingly dominated by a conception of the family as a productive unit. This is in contrast to focusing on the impact of family policy for the family’s reproductive functions, which has previously been more common (Gauthier & Hatzius, 1997). That means that in current research, family policies are predominantly analysed in terms of their implications for the role of families in securing labour supply, in particular women’s employment (Daly & Ferragina, 2018). The focus on the impact of family policy on the productive function of families also implies that children’s wellbeing is increasingly discussed in economic terms. Observers noted this trend already in the 2000s (Lister, 2003; Ostner, 2008).

A current example is the discussion of the role of childcare provision for building children’s human capital resources, which is common in studies of the so-called ‘social investment’ approach to welfare (Esping-Andersen, 2002; Kersbergen & Hemerijck, 2012). Resources used for childcare services and for parental leave policies can be considered investment in children’s life chances but also in those of parents whose negative employment consequences from care-related leave will be reduced.

### **Outcomes**

Current family policy research has a strong focus on outcomes. This is fuelled by the ever-increasing availability of harmonized cross-national surveys which include detailed data on the living conditions of families, as well as by an increased policy focus on employment, poverty, work–life balance, and wellbeing. For the ESPAnet community, the European Union (EU) Statistics on Income and Living Conditions survey has been particularly instrumental

here. A widespread focus of outcome-oriented comparative studies, which had already emerged in the 1990s (Gornick et al., 1997; Gornick & Meyers, 2003), is on the impact of family policies on parents' employment participation. Recent reform trends in family policy in European countries, as well as EU directives on working times, parental leaves, and work–life balance<sup>1</sup> spurred research interest in outcomes of family–employment reconciliation policies. The same holds for poverty and in particular child poverty, which is centre stage in European policy discourse, the European Platform for Investing in Children, and the European Child Guarantee being prominent examples.

Employment outcomes of family policies are studied on different dimensions, such as parents' employment participation, work hours, and earnings. The assumption is that parental leave policies provide different degrees of rights for job-protected leave, either paid (leave benefits) or unpaid, with differential effects for parents' freedom to care for children without risking job or earnings losses. One important focus of study is on differences in employment across different parental leave settings (Han et al., 2009; Misra et al., 2011; Nieuwenhuis et al., 2017). The provision of childcare services, by contrast, is thought to allow parents to pursue employment by outsourcing care responsibilities. Childcare is hence often considered the ideal-typical measure of work–family reconciliation. As a result, many comparative studies focused on the role of childcare services in facilitating women's employment, looking at childcare costs, availability or use, or spending on childcare. Ferragin (2020), for instance, documents a surge in cross-national studies from the 2000s onwards, many of these focusing on the outcomes of childcare policies.

Besides employment, research often studies poverty in light of different family policy settings. Current comparative family policy research asks how different policies reduce poverty for families or particular types of families. A focus of recent multicountry comparative studies has been on family policies' role in moderating poverty of single mothers (Brady & Burroway, 2012; Misra et al., 2012; Maldonado & Nieuwenhuis, 2015; Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, 2018) or children (Bäckman & Ferrarini 2010; Van Lancker & Van Mechelen, 2015).

Recent comparative studies caution about the reach of family policies, suggesting that the benefits of family policies are unequally distributed across families. For example, use of childcare services varies among parents from different social backgrounds (Pavolini & Van Lancker, 2018; Van Lancker, 2018), which has implications for its effects on employment and poverty. Recent evidence also points to unequal benefits of childcare services and parental leave policies for the employment of mothers with different levels of education (Hook & Paek, 2020). In general, more attention is being devoted to heterogeneous effects of family policies on outcomes in terms of class, gender, and education (Keck & Saraceno, 2013).

## Policies

The above-mentioned outcome orientation of the current family policy research agenda goes hand in hand with an increased focus on single family policy areas, and often comes at the cost of acknowledging the complexity and multidimensionality of family policy (Daly, 2020). Especially in multicountry comparisons, there is a tendency to analyse single policies rather than packages. Three types of policies are predominantly studied in current comparative family policy research: income supports to families (child benefits, family allowances), parental leave policies with a recently growing interest in leave policies for fathers, and childcare policies.

Income supports are granted in many different forms to families. A key distinction is whether they are provided as a universal benefit, for example to all families with children, or as targeted measures, for example to families with low incomes. While income supports to families has long been a key interest (see the third section below), research has arguably become more nuanced. The fiscalization of child benefits has been one topic (Daly & Ferragina, 2018). A more recent focus is on the design of child benefit systems in relation to the targeting versus universalism debate (Bárcena-Martin et al., 2018). This research benefited from advances in standard simulation and hypothetical household models, in which entitlements that run through the tax and benefit system are simulated for a range of household types. Recent research used this method to assess which types of child benefit system compensate best for the costs of children (Penne et al., 2020).

Parental leave policies take varied forms and shapes. The main types of leave are maternity leave (reserved for mothers), paternity leave (reserved for fathers), and parental leave (available to both parents; possibly same-sex parents as well) (Koslowski et al., 2020). In comparative family policy research, leave policy is mostly operationalized in terms of the time granted for job-protected leave rights and as to whether the leave time is paid or not, and the generosity of the benefit (Ray et al., 2010; Dobrotić & Blum, 2020). Empirically, studies also often employ social expenditures on parental leave schemes as a proxy of policy generosity or inclusiveness. It is now widely recognized that such proxy measures are usually ill-suited to operationalize actual policies (Otto & van Oorschot, 2019). In response, recent research ventures into the measurement of parental leave policies, and how policy designs can be operationalized for use in comparative studies (Otto et al., 2021), or whether survey microdata can be used to assess the actual entitlement to parental leave future parents have (Bártová & Emery, 2018).

Childcare policies (or: early childhood education and care), are also varied and complex, and comparative research faces even more limitations to study them comprehensively. Formal childcare is intrinsically difficult to

conceptualize and measure in comparative perspective (Yerkes & Javornik, 2019). First, childcare is provided on many different levels of governance (local, municipal, national). Second, childcare providers range between fully statutory, fully private, fully third-sector based, and any combination of the three – both within and across countries. Third, it is particularly difficult to distinguish between outright provision (supply) and demand of childcare, let alone between different financing mechanisms. Finally, an important aspect of childcare provision is the pedagogical quality, which is critical for child development. Comparative indicators covering all of these aspects for a sufficient period of time are not available as of yet. As a result, comparative research on childcare too relies on measures of expenditures or coverage to operationalize childcare policies.

### **Theoretical Perspectives in Current Family Policy Research**

Compared to earlier periods, the current agenda of comparative family policy research is less theoretically oriented. The comparison of quantitative indicators across countries is not usually embedded in a thick theoretical framework nor, it seems, is theory development among the key interests of the field today. Rather, concepts developed in prior theoretical work are commonly used to frame research interests, motivate comparisons, or for classifying family policies in quantitative studies.

Current comparative family policy research often uses previously developed concepts and ideas for framing an empirical research question. That means, concepts such as the male breadwinner model (Lewis, 1992, 2001), familialism (Saraceno, 1994; Leitner, 2003), or care regimes (Anttonen & Sipilä, 1996; Daly & Lewis, 2000) are discussed in background sections and inform new empirical puzzles. For example, common questions are how poverty rates developed for children across different breadwinner models, or how breadwinning is organized in households across different contexts of familialism. More recent conceptual approaches in the field of comparative family policy, which have been used in a similar way, are the social investment (Morel et al., 2011; Hemerijck, 2018) and life-course perspectives (Elder et al., 2003; Mayer, 2009). Both perspectives cannot be considered theories in a strict sense. But they reflect newer narratives in social research, which emphasize the processual nature of individual lives within policy contexts.

An area with some conceptual discussion in current comparative family policy research has been around the concept of defamilization. In its most common interpretation, defamilization refers to the degree to which welfare states reduce individuals' dependence on other family members. Distinctions between reducing economic or social dependencies made in the original use of the concept (Lister, 1994; McLaughlin & Glendinning, 1994) seem to have

been washed out somewhat over time. Since its first mentions, the concept has been applied broadly in empirical studies and sometimes with diverging meaning attached (Lohmann & Zagel, 2016).

There have been several contributions to flesh out the multiple facets of defamilization for comparing family policies across countries (Leitner & Lessenich, 2007; Daly, 2011). However, recent discussions have spurred new concepts such as dedomestication (Kröger, 2011), degenderization (Saxonberg, 2013), and demotherization (Mathieu, 2016). This renewed conceptual debate of defamilization is a welcome contribution to theorizing in comparative family policy research, which has tended to take an increasingly narrow focus on sub-areas of family policy. In order to describe the field more comprehensively, multidimensional concepts such as defamilization are useful frameworks (Zagel & Lohmann, 2021).

### **Methods in Current Family Policy Research**

Current comparative family policy research is methodologically diverse. There is a recently growing strand of empirical studies using multicountry designs with quantitative methods. Where outcomes of family policy are the research interest, studies commonly apply multilevel modelling strategies on large-scale comparative datasets. Another strand of comparative family policy research has used qualitative comparative analysis and fuzzy set methodology (Szelewa & Polakowski, 2008; Ciccia & Verloo, 2012).

Availability of comparative family policy data is an issue. In general, the tradition of mapping European policy landscapes with a regime lens has pushed the collection of comparative indicators in large-scale international datasets. And although family policy has not been at the centre of these projects, the availability of comparative family policy indicators has still improved overall (Lohmann & Zagel, 2018). However, such datasets are often limited in terms of the time period covered, the types of family policies measured, or the number of countries included. Researchers have hence heavily relied on social expenditure data (OECD, 2019), which is now available for long time periods and on a level of detail that allows to distinguish a number of different types of family policy.

### **EARLY DAYS AND TRAJECTORY OF FAMILY POLICY RESEARCH**

Comparative family policy research arguably ‘took off’ as a field of study in the late 1970s. Earlier studies applied case-oriented approaches, often focusing on one country, others compiled international data on single indicators (Gauthier & Koops, 2018). A pioneer in comparative family policy research

was the edition by Kamerman and Kahn (1978), which built on an earlier article by the same researchers (Kamerman & Kahn, 1976) and took the lack of a debate of policies for families in the United States as a starting point. The edition contributed to coining the term comparative family policy. In the 1990s, comparative family policy research developed in conversation with the broader welfare state literature, with a strong focus on typologizing and clustering (Lewis, 1992; Sainsbury, 1994). The emerging field of European comparative family policy was characterized by a strong focus on gender as an analytical lens on state–market–family relationships.

## **Outcomes**

In the early period of the 1970s and 1980s, comparative family policy research did not have a strong focus on outcomes. Where outcomes were studied, child poverty and mothers' health were a likely focus. Since the 1990s, a further widely studied outcome of family policies has been the division of labour in heterosexual couples. This strand of comparative family policy research is closely linked to the theorizing of gender and welfare states (Orloff, 1993; Sainsbury, 1994, 1999; Lewis, 2001, 2009; Daly & Rake, 2003). Earlier studies commonly presented comparative tables of aggregate employment rates of women and men or the composition of family incomes across different welfare state contexts. This demonstrated the characteristic links between a particular institutional setting and a gendered division of labour outcomes. A wealth of empirical research on these links emerged throughout the 1990s and 2000s (e.g., Lewis & Giullari, 2005; Pettit & Hook, 2009; Cooke & Baxter, 2010; Korpi et al., 2013).

Fertility has also been studied as an outcome of family policies (e.g., Gauthier, 2007; Kalwij, 2010; Wesolowski & Ferrarini, 2018). The interest in family policy effects on fertility grew in the early 2000s when fertility rates across Europe fell below 'population replacement level', which was perceived as a threat to the future of the intergenerational contract underpinning the welfare state. Politically, family policy was increasingly discussed from an arguably neonatalist stance, and comparative research tested the associations between generous family policies and fertility, often with ambiguous outcomes (Neyer & Andersson, 2008).

## **Policies**

Early family policy research picked up on the two major themes addressed by policies directed at families: securing mothers' health after birth (from the early twentieth century) and supporting the 'family wage' (from the 1950s). Hence, maternity leave regulations were among the first policies studied as



family policy. Income support policies such as child benefit, initially considered more as a poor relief measure, were increasingly viewed as family policies. Other family allowances were also analysed.

Parental leave was emerging as a more important topic in comparative family policy research in the 1990s, when several countries adapted their maternity leave regulations. In the second half of the 1980s, the first comparative studies on childcare services emerged as well, fuelled by emerging interest at the EU (then European Community) policy level.<sup>2</sup>

## **Theory**

The trajectory of comparative family policy research has been marked by a critical stance towards the consequences of welfare state intervention in family relationships. Critical social policy studies also engaged with family policies. Likewise, feminist scholarship has been influential in the field, highlighting the gendered nature of welfare state provision (Lewis, 1992; O'Connor, 1993; Orloff, 1993). That literature revealed the complexity of policies in general, and in those targeted towards the family in particular. Theories grappled with the multidimensional nature of policies for families, the different actors and power relationships involved. New ways of typologizing welfare regimes were proposed based on gender as an analytical framework (see also Chapter 11 by Knijn, this volume).

This literature contrasts with another theoretical orientation visible in comparative family policy research, which focuses more on the role of policies in supporting the functions of families. For example, Kaufmann et al.'s (2002) heuristic of modes of family intervention but also Kamerman and Kahn's (1978) approach can be seen in this light. Regime thinking was not the dominant focus, but rather the different aims and structures of policies and policy packages.

## **Methods**

The bulk of the earlier studies in comparative family policy either used more case-oriented, small-N approaches or applied a multicountry design with primarily descriptive methodologies. Multicountry quantitative designs using statistical methods were becoming more common when data availability grew in the 1990s and 2000s.

## EMERGING THEMES AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS IN FAMILY POLICY RESEARCH

### **Outcomes**

Rather than embarking into the study of ‘new’ outcomes, future research on the outcomes of family policy should look more at outcomes across diverse family settings. Several factors are important dimensions to study, for example family policy effects by social background, ethnicity, status of migration, and across complex family structures, possibly approached from an intersectional perspective.

Beyond maternal health as a focus in early family policy research, health has not been studied as a common outcome for all family members. It should become a more important focus in the future, not least considering the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Health may not be an obvious outcome of family policy, yet mental health is closely linked to mothers’ workloads in terms of combining employment and care. In light of the pandemic, several new questions arise, for example questions around whether children’s (in) ability to attend childcare centres through lockdown periods affected their socio-emotional wellbeing. A more general, systemic question also remains, namely how family policies, and the interaction between different family policy measures, can reinforce social security buffers to cushion income loss due to the economic consequences of the pandemic.

### **Policies**

The three key areas of family policy – income supports, leave policies, and childcare – are likely to remain a focus of future family policy research. We note a number of issues within these categories that should be of greater interest in future comparative family policy research, either because they previously received little attention or because they emerged as research topics due to policy reforms. These include taxation for families and child maintenance regulations as income support policies and leave rights to the second parent as parental leave policy.

Both child maintenance regulations (Skinner et al., 2017; Hakovirta et al., 2020) and fathers’ leave policies (Smith & Williams, 2007; Eydal & Rostgaard, 2016; Ma et al., 2020) have been the subject of comparative research. Maintenance systems are, however, often studied as separate from family policy, arguably because they are entangled with legal systems in many countries. It can be fruitful to consider them more holistically, considering institutional links. Fathers’ leave policy is an upcoming theme because

demand may be shifting and it may also become more politicized with progressing family change in many countries, and some countries' return to policy support of maternal home-care models.

## **Theory**

We agree with Daly (2020) that much of the current research does not reflect the complexity inherent to the field of family policy. Especially the way different policies relate, affecting policy outcomes in varying domains, is an often overlooked issue or is discussed only in passing, especially in outcome-oriented multicountry quantitative studies (but see Thévenon, 2016).

Given the impact that social investment thinking has had on the field, a critical interrogation of its assumptions and core concepts is overdue as well. Social investment studies tend to be thin on theory, treating family policy in light of the economics of human capital formation and future return on investment. Bringing back critical perspectives on policies and the welfare state, which characterized early research in this field, seems a fruitful route. Moreover, a return to core fundamentals that take a critical view of the current state of family policy and its role in the broader societal context has the potential to account for its complex multilevel structure and the different actors involved.

## **Methods**

The field of social sciences has been characterized by a turn towards causal inference, and in recent years many ESPAnet sessions explicitly dealt with methods to uncover causal effects as well. Family policy research is also benefiting from natural experiments in which policy changes are exploited to examine the causal impact of a given policy on a range of outcomes. Recent examples include studies of child benefit reforms, studies on child-care expansions, or studies on parental leave reforms (Lefebvre & Merrigan, 2008; Havnes & Mogstad, 2011; Ekberg et al., 2013; Kluge & Tamm, 2013; Bauernschuster & Schlotter, 2015; Bettendorf et al., 2015; Kleven et al., 2020).

A drawback of these methods is that it is difficult to compare policy changes across countries (external validity), and they risk losing sight of interaction effects and system complexity, or the political economy of policy implementation and change. While the field is moving towards causal inference, there is still, and perhaps even more so, a need for comparative studies focusing on the grander questions, underpinned by theoretical reasoning. A focus on the specific, such as with causal links between a small set of variables, risks losing sight of the general. Future research should strive to combine specific and general approaches, putting research findings and what can be learnt from them into the contexts of national and comparative policy settings.

## CONCLUSION

Our review of the current, past, and emerging issues of the family policy research agenda shows a rich and dynamic research field with a remarkable trajectory since the 1970s. The field has moved towards assessing outcomes of family policies in multicountry studies, with a tendency to look at different types of family policy separately. Although many of the concepts developed in earlier research have been applied and adapted, we noted the lack of a deeper theoretical engagement. In short, much of the field is preoccupied with comparing outcomes across European family policy settings loosely described in terms of family support or breadwinner models, and increasingly using refined, causally oriented methodologies to uncover policy effects in ever greater detail. We suggest that a return to more theoretically oriented reasoning could benefit the research field, allowing for a greater contextualization of findings.

## NOTES

1. Directive (EU) 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on Work–Life Balance for Parents and Carers and Repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU, 2019.
2. The first comparative report on childcare in the European Community was published by the European Commission Childcare Network in 1985.

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