The Impact of National Policy on Work–Family Experiences

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Abstract

Work-life scholars emphasize the need for cross-national studies in order to understand the variety of ways in which people experience the work-life interface across the world. Within this chapter, an overview is given of national work-family policies present in Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries and the changes in policy that occurred across time. This is followed by a review of research that examines the impact of national policies on work–family outcomes. Research on this topic is increasing but scarce. Research to date suggests that policies are beneficial for the general contentment of working parents with the way they are able to combine work and family life, but are less effective in reducing experienced work-family conflict or time pressure.

Key Words: work-family policies, cross-national comparison, policy impact, leave policies, work-family outcomes

Introduction

In the past few decades, national governments have increasingly introduced and developed social policies, such as parental leave, public child care, and the right to reduce working hours, to support working parents who combine paid work with family life. Although this development occurred across most developed countries, large variations do exist between countries. Sweden, for instance, was one of the first countries to introduce national policies in this area and is still famous for its generous parental leave system and extensive public daycare. The United States, in contrast, stands out for the near absence of country-level social support (Alten et al., 2014; Edberg, Eriksson, & Friebel, 2013; Heymann, McNell, & Earle, 2013; Strandt & Nordenmark, 2006).

Because social policy context varies across countries, lack of awareness of the effects of national policies presents a barrier to the understanding of how work–family experiences in different societies (Ollier-Malaterre, Valour, den Dulk, & Kossek, 2013). Therefore, work-life scholars have emphasized the need for cross-national studies in order to understand the variety of ways in which people experience the work-life interface across the world. This chapter offers an overview of the nature and type of social policies developed by national governments in developed countries, which aim to support the combination of work and family life, and our knowledge so far about their impact on work–family outcomes.

The chapter unfolds as follows. Differences in policies across countries have inspired scholars to develop welfare state classifications in an effort to compare different policy models and their impact across countries (i.e., Esping-Andersen, 1990, 1999; Korpi, 2000; Korpi, Ferrarini, & Englund, 2013; Sainsbury, 1996). These different country classifications are discussed followed by an overview of national work–family policies present within developed countries across the world. With regard to policies, we first discuss the nature of social policies currently present within different countries.

Deinstitutionalization refers to the degree to which welfare state or market provisions ease the burden of caring responsibilities of families, whereas deconsolidation refers to the degree of social rights that permit people to make their living standards independent of market forces. For instance, dependence on the family or the market can be reduced when the state offers social policies such as parental leave, public child care, or unemployment benefits.

Originally, the classification resulted in three welfare state regimes: the social democratic, the conservative, and the liberal. A classic example of the social democratic regime is Sweden in which the state offers extensive support for combining work and family life. Countries such as Italy and Germany represent the conservative regime, in which the family takes a more central role and the level of national policies is more limited. In the liberal regime, support for working parents is left to the markets, also resulting in a lower level of social policies initiated by the state. The United Kingdom and the United States are examples of this regime type.

This classification of welfare state regimes has not been without criticism and debate. First, the classification focused mainly on the Northern European welfare states and the United States. A strong case has been made for a separate fourth Mediterranean model for Southern European countries (e.g., Antonelli & Spïkli, 1996), and for a fifth model to include post-socialist countries (Blussæfeld & Drobnic, 2001). Moreover, some Western European countries are characterized by a hybrid form or mix of different welfare state regimes. The Netherlands, for instance, is seen as an ambiguous case because it combines the traditional family support characteristic of the conservative regime with several universal social policies that are more in line with the social democratic welfare regime (Sainsbury, 1996). Moreover, within the conservative regime, some countries place more emphasis on the role of the state (France, Belgium) whereas others rely more on employers and the family in combination with modest state support (the Netherlands, Germany). In addition, recent neoliberal trends in these countries in relation to the restructuring of the welfare state has led to a stronger emphasis on the role of the market, that is work–family policies offered by employers instead of by the state (den Dulk & Groeneweld, 2012).

Second, Esping-Andersen’s original typology of three welfare state regimes was criticized for not paying enough attention to gender, the role of the family, and unpaid work (Lewis, 1992; Otro, 1993; Plantenga & van Doorn, 1993; Sainsbury, 1996).
Finally, the dual-carer dimension reflects policies that encourage fathers to take on more caring responsibilities by offering paid parent leave and/or weeks of paid parent leave, typically for younger children ("baby quota") (Korpi et al., 2013). When considering how countries score on these policy dimensions, three country clusters appear, which are in fact quite similar to the welfare state regimes distinguished by Esping-Andersen: a group of countries with relatively many traditional-family policies and low values on dual-earner and dual-carer support (Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands); Scandinavian countries that score high on both the dual-earner and dual-carer dimension; and a group of countries with what Korpi and colleagues (2013) call market-oriented family policies, that is, low level of all types of public policies and a reliance on the market as a provider of support (e.g., Australia, Canada, Ireland, Japan, New Zealand, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States). In the next section, the national policies currently present within developed countries are discussed in more detail.

Review of National Policies on Work and Family Life Support

There is a growing body of research mapping the level and development of national policies aiming to support the combination of work and family life, and this research shows substantial variations between countries in the provision of policies and with respect to the type of support that is developed and emphasized (Gornick & Meyers, 2003; Korpi et al., 2015; Moss, 2014; OECD, 2007; Thieben, 2011). In Tables 22.1 and 22.2, an overview is given of national work-family policies present within European and non-European Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries. First, we will discuss the main elements in these tables and point to differences and similarities between social policies in the countries.

Tables 22.1 and 22.2 provide an overview of statutory leave: maternity leave, parent leave, and parental leave. For all three leave forms, the amount of time people are entitled to as well as whether the leaves are paid for are described. Next to statutory leave we look at the amount of children in formal daycare until the age of 3 years, and from the age of 3 years to the moment children reach the age of compulsory school. In addition to formal daycare, parents can also adjust their working hours and do the care task themselves. National governments increasingly develop legislation in relation to reduction of working hours. First an overview is
### Table 22.2: Maternity Leave, Parental Leave, and Extended Parental Leave for Children in OECD Countries, 2014

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Maternity Leave</th>
<th>Parental Leave</th>
<th>Extended Parental Leave</th>
<th>Support for Infancy</th>
<th>Support for First Year</th>
<th>Support for Children</th>
<th>Support for Young Children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>12 weeks*</td>
<td>2 weeks</td>
<td>24 months**</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>6 weeks**</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>12 weeks***</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>3-12 months***</td>
<td>2 weeks***</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>12 weeks***</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>12-14 months**</td>
<td>2 weeks**</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>12 weeks***</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>10 weeks**</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Zealand</td>
<td>12 weeks**</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>12 months***</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>4 month**</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Korea</td>
<td>12 weeks**</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>3 months**</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>12 weeks*</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>24 months**</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Note: * Maternity entitlement but unpaid. ** Maternity entitlement paid for at least the first 6 months of earnings. *** Maternity entitlement paid for all or part of the duration to all parents at 60% of earnings or more (Mowl, 2013). Na = not comparable data available.

Given the many social policies in place in different European countries, European countries are the forefront when it comes to the reconciliation between work and family life through social policy (Gornick & Meyers, 2003). Most of the social policies on work and family are developed in Europe, and most of the literature was for a long time focused on policy development in Europe, although currently there is a considerable amount of social policy that aims to support working parents in other OECD countries as well. Table 22.2 provides an overview of the social policies for several other non-European OECD countries.

Maternity leave is, despite country differences, the most established social policy. The medical aspect, that a child has to be under parental leave, is mentioned in the legislation.
offer far more than the 14 week minimum of the EU, Australia offers 18 weeks and South Africa offers 4 months (see Table 22.2).

Paternity leave is less well established. Leave for fathers is also much shorter, from 1 to 2 days in Italy, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands, to 2 weeks in more countries such as France, Slovenia, or Iceland. At the same time, a considerable number of countries do not offer paternity leave. When fathers want to care for their newborn and/or partner, they will have to take annual leave days. Paternity leave is not considered to be a policy related to health issues such as maternity leave, despite psychological studies on the well-being of children that point to the need for both parents to bond with their child in the first year. Paternity leave seems not very widespread outside of Europe, although Brazil and New Zealand also offer 1 to 2 weeks, and Australia offers 2 weeks.

Paternal leave enables men and women to "take care of a child until a given age" (Directive 2010/18/ EU). It can be a family entitlement as in the case in for instance Austria, Canada, Finland, France, Hungary, and Russia, or it can be an individual entitlement as in for instance Australia, Greece, the Netherlands, and Spain; or it can be a mixed entitlement, which is the case in Iceland, Norway, Portugal, and Sweden (Moss, 2014). Paternal leave shows a huge variety across European countries. In most of the Eastern European countries 3-year (36 months) period seems the norm, as in Germany, France, and Spain. Some countries allow a 2-year period, for example, Austria and Australia. The rest of the countries offer less than 2 years paternal leave. In the Scandinavian countries paternal leave is accompanied by a so-called daddy quota, which implies that the male partner is required to take a part of the parental leave, otherwise the employee loses the leave period. The special "daddy" quota aim to encourage fathers to take leave, thereby stipulating the equal division of care duties between men and women (Brandt & Kvarnes, 2002; Røngång, 2002), representing the dual-career dimension as discussed by Koop et al. (2013).

Maternity leave is specific for women only, but parental leave is meant for both parents. However, when we look at the use of both maternity leave and parental leave (see Figure 22.1), almost none of the working men use parental leave. Only in Romania and Finland do working fathers seem to use paternal leave, although still much less than women do. The use of maternity leave and parental leave is also dependent on whether it is paid or unpaid. For parental leave the low use in the first year of having a child, for instance in the United Kingdom, Greece, or Belgium, can be explained by the fact that the leave is unpaid and/or by the duration of the leave. Norway and Sweden are not shown in Figure 22.1, but the daddy quota introduced in these countries has led to a greater use of parental leave by fathers (Brandt & Kvarnes, 2002). Until children enter formal education, in most countries between the ages of 5 and 7 years, working parents need a child care solution during their working hours. Tables 22.1 and 22.2 show the provision of formal child care. The reasons for offering formal child care can differ. Governments can introduce child care for a variety of reasons: an economical, a pedagogical, and a gender equality reason. The economic reason for formal child care is that the parents can participate in the labor market as long as others take care of their children during working hours. This system is economically rational as long as the costs for formal child care do not outweigh the earned income of the working parent(s). For many governments, the economic reason has become increasingly important as more welfare states need full participation in the labor market. In times with a low fertility rate and a growing amount of people not working—working—young people stay longer in education and older people live longer after their retirement—there is an increasing need for people who are able to work and who participate in the labor market to finance the social security system. But even in the past, when there was a need for women to participate in the labor market, the establishment of child care became necessary. A second reason for supporting formal child care is that a child benefits socially and culturally from association with its peers (Easingland-Andersen, 2009). This is a pedagogical reason, children benefit from the socialization with their peer group. Additional, formal child care minders are more and more trained in educating young children instead of only watching them. A third reason for establishing formal child care is that formal child care increases gender equality between the parents (Easingland-Andersen, 2009), enabling mothers to combine work and care. For instance, in Sweden in the 1960s the idea rose that family members would all benefit more if gender relations were more equal, and caring for children in publicly funded day-care was the solution (Lundquist, 2011).

The availability and use of formal child care vary widely between countries, especially for children under the age of 3 years, from 3% in Poland and 5% in the Czech Republic, and around 50% in South Korea, the Netherlands, and Sweden, to 74% in Denmark. Therefore, in addition to formal child care, in some countries informal child care remains very important. Informal child care can consist of grandparents, neighbors, friends, or a combination of people from the social network of working parents, taking care of the children. Informal child care can also be chosen as the most socially desirable option, especially in countries with a strong motherhood ideology such as the Netherlands (Yerkes & Peper, 2011). Countries with a strong motherhood culture emphasize the importance of caring for the children by their mothers. Despite recent changes toward dual earners on the labor market in these countries, the cultural ideal still favors women's caring for their children at home (Kremers, 2007; Morgan, 2006). In addition to a motherhood ideology informal child care can also be the most economically feasible solution for working parents if there is no state support, as is the case in the United Kingdom (Yerkes & Peper, 2011).

Next to the above-mentioned leave policies the right to reduce working hours enables parents to take care of their children. Countries differ very much with respect to this right (see Tables 22.1 and 22.2). In some countries women have a right to temporarily reduce working hours to enable them to breastfeed their children; other countries enable both fathers and mothers to reduce their hours until the child reaches a certain age. For instance in Australia, Austria, Greece, Finland, Japan, and Spain. Many countries do not have any formal rights for employees to reduce their working hours to be able to care for children. Alternatively, working parents can reduce their working hours on a more structural basis by taking a part-time job; however, in almost all countries such a choice leads to a weaker position on the labor market. The Netherlands is the only country in which the reduction of working hours, as well as asking for more hours, is a legal right for all employees, not only for parents. In addition, part-time workers in the Netherlands have the same rights as full-time employees (Smits et al., 2012).

Figure 22.1. Use of maternity and parental leave by mothers and fathers with a child under the age of 1 year (in percentage).


Static and Dynamic Approaches to Social Policies

Tables 22.1 and 22.2 are a static representation of the work–family policies in place. Specifically, they represent the state of affairs on leave policies in 2014, on child care in 2011 and 2010, and regulations concerning the reduction of working hours in 2014. As Tiefel et al. (2013) argued, to truly understand the work–family experiences of individuals we need a dynamic perspective, especially since there have been considerable policy changes in recent decades. This dynamic perspective takes into account that the national context is not a static situation, but that "... the individuals' experiences are colored not only by what currently is but also by what has been" (Tiefel et al., 2013, p. 450). Individuals make decisions on the reconciliation between work and care not only based on the contemporary policies at hand, but they explicitly or implicitly make choices based on their past experience (Tiefel et al., 2013, 2015). Many countries are, in fact, characterized by substantial policy changes over time.

The OECD family database (2015) enables us to show a more dynamic perspective on work–family policies. Figure 22.2 shows the historical development regarding the period of job-protected parental leave for mothers. The x-axis starts on the left side.
with countries in which parental leave was introduced first, followed toward the right side of the x-axis by countries in which parental leave was introduced later. For instance, in the Czech Republic parental leave was introduced in 1956. In 1970 the duration of job-protected parental leave for mothers was 80 weeks, and in 1990 the amount of weeks increased to 134 weeks. In 2014 the duration of job-protected parental leave was still 134 weeks. Many countries did not have parental leave policies in 1970. In Canada, for instance, these policies were introduced in 1991, and the duration of job-protected parental leave for mothers was 35 weeks, which was not changed in 2014.

Interestingly, many countries in which parental leave was introduced first, in the 1960s and 1970s (Austria, Czech Republic, Slovak Republic, Poland, Hungary, Poland, and France), still offer the longest job-protected parental leave for mothers, except for Italy. And in those countries the parental leave period is increasing when we compare the 1970 data with data from 1990 and 2014. All the countries that introduced job-protected parental leave for mothers from the 1980s onward offer a shorter period, except for Germany. It seems that social policies also need time to establish themselves, but they are not likely to disappear. It will be interesting to see if the countries that introduced parental leave more recently, such as Canada, the Netherlands, or Ireland, will also show a comparable trend in the increase of parental leave weeks in the near future.

Figure 22.3 shows the differences in parental leave allowances between countries by presenting the total duration of paid leave for mothers after childbirth, thus summing paid maternity leave and paid parental leave. This figure provides an overview of the bulk of the paid leave that has been established in the past 45 years. The left side of the figure shows countries in which there had been a large increase in the total duration of paid leave since the 1970s, and the right side of the figure shows countries with smaller increases in leave duration. However, since 1990s there had been an enormous increase in the total duration of paid leave after child birth, except for the United States, which offered no paid leave after child birth. However, since 1990 some countries, such as Germany or Czech Republic, show a reduction in the total duration of paid leave. This reduction is partly explained by the introduction of an option which offers higher payment rates to parents for a relatively short period of leave (www.oe.cd/info/social/familiy/database).

Since 1990, thus only in the past 25 years, we witness an increase and establishment of policies that enable working parents to start reconciling work and care tasks. Work-family policies are relatively new, and are also quite often ad hoc, which may affect the use of these policies. Working parents and employees have to get used to the existence and possibilities of these policies. Furthermore, parents need a certain stability with regard to the care of their child. Thus when policies such as child care are in a constant state of change, parents might fall back on or remain with earlier forms of care. For example, in the Netherlands, recent changes in child care policies led to a retreat from the labor market of women, in particular among those in lower wage jobs (Portegijs, Cloû, & Merchel, 2014).

The review of the national policies shows a great variety between countries. However, a historical perspective points to a trend toward more extensive social policies to reconcile work and family life, at least with respect to leave policies. In the next section the impact of national policies will be discussed.

The Impact of National Policies on Work-Family Experiences

Comparative research including a substantial number of countries investigating the impact of national work-family policies is still scarce but increasing. Within this chapter we focus on studies that look at the impact of these policies on work-family outcomes. Although there is a related body of research investigating the impact of national work-family policies on gender equality (e.g., Köpki et al., 2013, Mardel, 2011, Miers, Budig, & Boeckmann, 2011), it falls beyond the scope of this chapter.

Cross-national research looking at the impact of policies on work-family outcomes often compares a limited number of countries, between 5 and 12 countries (Abendroth & den Dulk, 2011; Allen et al., 2014; Fahlén, 2014; Ruppert, 2013; Studari & Nordströmsk, 2006; van der Lippe, Jager, & Körp, 2006). An exception is the study of Seiler (2009) based on the European Social Survey, which includes 23 countries. Within these studies there is a strong focus on European countries. Existing studies differ with respect to the way national work-family policies are measured. Studies including a limited number of countries often use the country as a proxy for the level and nature of work-family policies (see for instance Abendroth & den Dulk, 2011; Studari & Nordströmsk, 2006; van der Lippe, 2006). As argued before, this is problematic because the impact of work-family policies cannot be distinguished from other country-level factors such as labor market conditions or cultural norms and values (Köpki et al., 2013). More recent and large-scale studies, on the other hand, either make use of a work-family policy index (see for instance Fahlén, 2014, investigate one specific policy, or investigate the impact of different types of policies (e.g., Allen et al., 2014; Seiler, 2009).

The latter is preferable because policies can have different aims, such as supporting the traditional family, dual-career families, or the father’s involvement in care (Köpki et al., 2013).

The general assumption in all studies is that national policies make it easier to combine paid work and caring responsibilities and consequently

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**Figure 22.3.** Length of paid leave available to mothers in 1970, 1990, and 2014.

help to diminish work-to-family and family-to-work conflict among working families (Allen et al., 2014; Fabhén, 2014; Strandt & Nordenmark, 2006). Public child care provides the possibility of outsourcing care during time at work and allows parents to enter employment. Leave policies, such as parental leave, enable parents to temporarily care for their children at home without losing their job. Time/space flexibility allows parents to adjust working hours and place of work to responsibilities outside work.

Although national work-family policies are frequently viewed as an important resource reducing work-family conflict, current research does not always confirm this expectation. Countries with relatively generous national work-family policies such as Sweden also score high on experienced work-family conflict (e.g., Strandt & Nordenmark, 2006; van der Lippe, Jager, & Kop, 2003). Moreover, in countries in which national policies are rarely absent, such as the United States, relatively low levels of reported work-family conflict are found (Spector et al., 2005). On the other hand, an eight-country study investigating the impact of various sources of support on overall satisfaction with the way the work-life balance is managed rather than the degree of work-family conflict did find relatively high satisfaction rates in Sweden, Finland, and the Netherlands compared to countries with less extensive policies (Arends-Roodenburg & den Dulk, 2011).

A first explanation for the finding of high reports on work-family conflict in countries characterized by generous policies is that extensive national policies increase women’s labor market participation without an equal increase in family work. Hence, sample selection effects might result in finding that in countries with generous national policies relatively high levels of work-family conflict are found (Fabhén, 2014; Scherer & Steuber, 2009; Strandt & Nordenmark, 2006). For instance, counted work-family conflict in five different European countries: Sweden, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Czech Republic, and Hungary. They found that Swedish women report the highest level of work-family conflict. However, this was partly related to national differences in working conditions of women. "Swedish women experience more work-family conflict because they more often hold qualified jobs and work longer hours than women in the Netherlands and the UK" (Strandt & Nordenmark, 2006, p. 66).

When controlling for working conditions, differences between these countries disappeared. However, work-family conflict did explain the lower levels of conflict among Czech and Hungarian women compared to Swedish women. Like Sweden, Hungary and Czech Republic are also characterized by extensive national work-family policies (see Table 22.1). Strandt and Nordenmark (2006) suggest that this finding might be due to differences in gender ideology in Swedish egalitarian gender attitudes are more frequently found in countries with gender-neutral national work-family policies i.e., the gender role conflict hypothesis (Steuber, 2009).

Recent research paying attention to both the policy context and gender conflict suggests that while the extent of work-family conflict differs across countries, the causes and consequences of conflict are similar. (Fabhén, 2014; Nilsson, Brattin, & Lewis, 2012). Fabhén (2014) looked at the gender gap in perceived conflict (i.e., who is responsible for the management of informal care). While gender gap in perceived conflict may exist in all countries, the extent of the gender gap in perceived conflict was higher in countries in which women are more likely to report conflict in care management tasks, including past research (Hunting, 2015).

Policy makers and governments have historically targeted policies to support women in the labor market, and several countries have expanded their coverage of labor market policies. In Sweden, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom, the number of women in the labor market has increased significantly. The number of women in the labor market has increased from 60% in 1980 to 75% in 2000. However, women still face challenges in balancing work and family responsibilities.

Qualitative research studying the everyday life of working parents in various European countries confirms the salience of both class and gender in the way working parents experience policies (Nilsson et al., 2012). In a case study on social policy and the lived experience by women in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, Verleys, Standing, Wintja, and Wain (2010) found that a lack of social policies constrains women from fully realizing a satisfactory work-life balance. Even other hand "an abundance of work-life policies can hinder individual opportunities for care, thereby disregarding individual caring preferences" (p. 425).

A third and related reason why studies at first instance find a limited effect of national work-family policies is that in order for policies to be effective workplace support is crucial. It is at the workplace that policies are implemented, where in practice, policies are granted or denied. Within organizations (direct) supervisors play a crucial role in the conversion of rights into entitlements of employees to use work-family policies. Within an unequal work environment, parents may fear that when they take up leave or reduce their hours in order to combine work and family responsibilities it may harm their career (Allen et al., 2014; den Dulk et al., 2013). Fathers with a high-status job in the study of Nilsen and colleagues (2012), for instance, indicated that they felt they were punished for taking up parental leave because it was seen by their employer as a sign that they were less committed to their job. Allen and colleagues (2014) found in their 12 country study that both general organizational support for the combination of work and family life and support from the supervisor moderate the relationship between national paid leave and work-family conflict.

Finally, to investigate the impact of national policies on women’s work-family conflict, we need to consider the context in which policies are enacted. Studies that include such data. Most studies rely on cross-sectional data and apply a cross-national comparative approach to obtain policy variation (Allen et al., 2014; Strandt & Nordenmark, 2006; van der Lippe et al., 2006). Many studies include only a limited number of countries. This is problematic because using such an approach makes it difficult to identify causal effects. When it comes to determining the impact of a specific policy on work-family outcomes because within countries different factors and conditions are at play, i.e., other policies, the normative context, or labor market conditions (Duvvurat, 2014). Recently, scholars started to study variations within country contexts using longitudinal data (Duvvurat, 2014). Knowing these variations is important for understanding how policies affect work-family outcomes.
instance, studied the impact of the introduction of the specific daddy nursh in Norway. Their findings indicate that after the daddy nursh was introduced, respondents reported less conflict about household work. Elberg et al. (2013) found a short-term effect of the introduction of the nursh in Sweden: after the introduction of the nursh fathers took up more parental leave. They did not, however, find an increase in the share of leave taken by fathers to care for sick children, which would have a more long-term effect on the division of paid work between men and women.

Overall, research seems to suggest that national work–family policies are successful in increasing female employment participation, in particular among middle-class and lower educated women, women’s continued employment, and the number of hours they work. So far policies have been less effective in reducing experienced work–family conflict, although there are indications that policies contribute to the overall level of contentment concerning paid work and family life. However, the policy impact on work–family outcomes such as experienced role conflict might be obscured by the integration of women on the labor market. National work–family policies do not eliminate the attitudes of parents to combine work with family life, resulting in more dual-earner families and increasing the likelihood for conflictual demands.

Furthermore, gender and class are highly salient to the analysis of the impact of policies on work–family outcomes. They shape the way policies are experienced and play out in everyday life. A supportive work environment is crucial for the success of policies, in particular a supportive supervisor (Allen et al., 2014). The assumption that the ideal workers are those who are always available for work, reproducing the actual use of policies. In particular among fathers (Nilsen et al., 2012), diminishing the impact of policies.

Conclusions

Based on existing research should be drawn with caution, however. Most studies are cross-sectional and are based on a limited number of countries and the samples upon which the findings are based are not always representative of the countries included.

Conclusions

Governments in most developed countries have introduced social policies that aim to support working parents in reconciling work with family life. A review of national policies in European and non-European OECD countries shows large differences between countries. Countries can be grouped together by means of the concept of welfare regimes (Esping-Andersen, 1990, 1999), and the variations within the welfare regimes points to the path dependency of the development of work–family policies in countries. When a more dynamic approach is used (cf. Tiefert et al., 2013), national policies not only differ, but they also develop over time. In the past decades we have witnessed an increase in the availability of social policies that enable working parents to balance their work and private life. A second trend is the extension of the length of the leaves in most countries. It takes adjustment time for policies to settle. Maternity leave is the least contested social policy. Child care and parental leave have found a place in most countries, but few countries have well-established policies to enable working fathers to provide care. Despite the increase in work–family policies, the male breadwinner model still plays an important role in national cultures.

Although there is a substantial body of research mapping existing policies and policy change over time, research investigating the impact of those policies on work–family outcomes is still limited, especially at large-scale cross-national studies that include a large number of countries and a large number of cases. The study of the impact of national policies on other country-level factors, in particular national gender culture, more recent; most studies focus on developed countries. Future research should also incorporate national or international third world country contexts. In addition, longitudinal research is needed to take into account policy changes over time and to increase our knowledge of causal mechanisms for the impact of national work–family policies.

Studies should look at various work–family outcomes. So far, most studies investigate the impact of policies on parents’ work–family conflict, whereas less attention is paid to positive outcomes such as work–family enrichment or the overall satisfaction with the way work–family balance is managed. Research so far suggests that policies are beneficial for the general contentment of working parents with the way they are able to combine work and family life but are less effective in reducing experienced work–family conflict or time pressure. However, more research is needed before substantive conclusions can be drawn.

Further studies should continue to examine the interplay between social policies, national cultural–organizational support, and household and individual variables in order to fully understand how social policies help to reduce work–family conflict and to enhance people’s satisfaction with their

work–life balance (Allen et al., 2014). Scholars have argued that it is important to look not only at the presence of policies but also at the actual use of policies. Some of entitlement to work–family support is an interesting concept in this respect. It refers to the extent to which people expect support and believe that they are allowed to use it (Levin & Smithson, 2015). The concept refers to both the presence of policies and the cultural sustain in countries. Amatya Sen’s capabilities and agency approach (Sen, 1999), which has recently been applied in the work–family field, provides a valuable framework for studying the impact of policies within their cultural context (Hobson, 2014).

In sum, this chapter provided an overview of the nature and type of social policies developed by national governments in European and non-European OECD countries, which aim to support the combination of work and family life, and of our knowledge so far about their impact on work–family outcomes. Research on the impact of national policies is still emerging and much remains to be done to advance it. To fully understand the way fathers and mothers across different classes and countries experience work and family life and how this is affected by existing and changing social policies, further comparative research is needed as well as longitudinal research within countries evaluating policy reforms. Policy impact needs to be studied in conjunction with systemic changes in culture and institutions over time.

Note

OECD member countries.

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