

Private Responsibility or Individual Right? Childcare Attitudes and the Moral Economies of Social Investment

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Within the social investment paradigm, addressing the social risk of adequate child care becomes one of the most important tasks of European welfare states. However, recent literature has found that citizens in different welfare states have different attitudes about who should receive statutory support for child care and why (Bonoli, 2021). So far, little is known about why the sensemaking of citizens differs in this regard. Addressing this research gap, the paper discusses the role of different moral economies in shaping attitudes towards social investment family policies across different European welfare states.

Building upon the moral economy approach (Mau, 2004; Sachweh, 2012) and feminist welfare state research (Daly, 2022; Fraser, 1994), the proposed paper argues that welfare institutions do not only distribute resources but provide legitimacy for specific ways of childcare while disregarding others. Such a variation in statutory legitimacy for childcare provision does not only reflect differences in power resources and normative shifts among social actors but also historical moral legacies embodied in the different institutional settings. In Germany and the UK, dual-earner parents who privately invest in their children's future and negotiate a gender-equal labor division on their own responsibility receive the highest degree of statutory legitimacy. Here, the moral economy of legitimate childcare provision strongly supports a middle-class habitus. In Sweden and Spain, the right to childcare tends to be recognized regardless of the parent's social status and gender and is largely seen as the responsibility of the welfare state. However, while childcare is understood as an object of intra-familial labor division in Spain, in Sweden, every individual parent has the right to do both: perform paid employment and care work (Lüth, 2021).

This article asks whether such a variation in legitimate ways to provide childcare under the social investment paradigm shapes country-specific differences in citizens' attitudes. To answer that question, the proposed paper relies upon a two-fold empirical strategy: First, it uses statistical data from the European Social Survey – Round 8 – to illustrate how citizens' attitudes towards childcare differ across countries and social classes. Second, it compares focus group discussions amongst citizens across different European welfare states (Germany, the UK, Denmark, and Slovenia) and class backgrounds concerning collective interpretations about who should receive family and child care policies. Is care work seen as the private

responsibility of the ‘active family’ or as the individual right of every parent? Drawing on a secondary analysis of qualitative data from the WelfSOC research project, this explores whether collective justification patterns reflect country-specific moral economies. Preliminary analysis reveals class-specific patterns in citizens’ reference to ‘legitimate’ ways of childcare provision. In Germany and the United Kingdom, for example, the middle class successfully reproduces statutory ideal types of childcare provision. Among the working class, on the other hand, the productive and privatized nature of care provision tends to be stronger criticized. The study argues that revealing these inequities in legitimized forms of childcare is essential to creating fair and equitable childcare policies that meet the needs of all citizens. By introducing the moral economy approach to the social investment literature, it emphasizes how different welfare states shape inequalities in legitimate childcare provision (cf. Garrizmann et al. 2022), and how these inequalities are reflected in citizens’ justifications of care provision (Bonoli, 2021; Heuer and Zimmermann, 2022).