

Research project: Explaining policy responses to family changes

1. Theory/model

Empirical question

The aim of this research is to analyse how family change and the social problems associated with it are experienced and perceived in different political contexts, leading to different policy responses. It focuses on three dimensions of change: population ageing, changing patterns of family formation and dissolution, and changes in intergenerational dependency.

The argument that guides the research is that political responses not only depend on the pace and degree of family change. They also depend on how citizens and politicians experience and perceive it, how they come to define new social problems associated with it, how they understand the range of choices open to them, and how they interpret their interest within a given range of possible options.

Theoretical relevance: what has been written on the question?

The empirical question I am interested connects with two different literatures. The first one is the literature on family change and its effects on individual well-being and social and economic performance. The second one is the literature on family policy-making.

Regarding the first one, several studies have given evidence of the important socio-demographic transformations experimented in the EU countries since the mid-70. The process of population ageing (caused essentially by the decline in fertility rates and the increase of life expectancy) has been accompanied by a fall in family size (e.g., it has become less common for several generations to live together). In parallel to this, as a result of changing patterns of family formation and dissolution, alternative family forms (e.g., cohabitation, reconstituted families resulting from divorce or separation) have become more widespread, creating new patterns of social risk and demand. Both trends have also brought changes in intergenerational dependency and in the ways in which family solidarity operates (Eurostat:1997, OECD:1999).

The political implications of these trends are affected by the labour market and economic context (Saraceno:1997, Esping Andersen:1999), and they will affect not only the family-related policies (e.g., benefits and services directly targeted to couples with children or dependent members to

care¹), but also other public policies such as pensions, unemployment or housing policies (Gauthier:1999). According to Hantrais (1999), these political implications can be summarised into three dilemmas for social policy intervention: whether governments should intervene to influence population growth, whether governments should recognise and protect different family structures, and whether and how governments should intervene to support families in their caring tasks in a context of economic pressures to contain social expenditure.

Regarding the second source of literature, several comparative studies have revealed the existence of strong inter-country differences in the orientations, nature and objectives of family policies that cannot be explained by differences in population trends or family structures (Kamerman and Kahn:1978, Hantrais and Lethablier:1996, Gauthier:1996, Millar and Warman:1996). Most of these studies are mainly descriptive. Thus, although they point out the existence of an association between the historical, cultural and political context and the content and objectives of family policies, the proper causal link between contextual factors and policy outcomes is often missing.

Theoretical significance of the research

The theoretical contribution that this research pretends to do is to fill the gap that exists in the family policy literature; that is, to clarify the causal link between contextual factors and policy outputs.

This theoretical aim raises concerns that are addressed by general theories on policy-making. Since I am specially interested in how do social phenomena become policy problems, and how do particular understandings of problems emerge to guide policy-making, I believe that two types of literature will be specially fruitful for me: the literature on the first stages of the policy process (e.g., problem definition, agenda setting) and the literature on the role of ideas in the policy-making process.

Policy significance of the research

Since I focus my attention in the policy responses to current processes of social change, I believe that the research can also have policy significance. At the country level, it can provide a deep understanding of the policy-making process and thus accounting for the boundaries as well as the potential for policy innovation in family-related policies. At the European level, it can assess the potential for further development of social policy at EU level.

¹ Gauthier (1999) includes direct cash transfers and tax relief for families with children, maternity and parental leave, childcare facilities and subsidies, family law, elder care allowances and pension contribution for people with family

2. Methodology: How to explain?

The research design is still undeveloped. For the moment, I am thinking on a comparative case study of two regions or countries. In the election of the units of analysis, I can see different options.

- a) Most similar cases design: Two countries that are experiencing similar processes of family change, but that differ in their policy responses. E.g, Italy and Spain.
- b) Most dissimilar cases design: Two countries dissimilar in many elements except in a crucial one (e.g., a strong influence of catholicism). E.g., Spain and Germany.

There is, still, a third possibility:

- c) Combination of both similar and dissimilar methods: Four regions (similar and dissimilar) of the same country. Eg, Spain.

2.1. Data and data sources

The research will combine two different data sources.

- Literature-based survey of statistical data and quantitative descriptive analysis for the first phase of the research. This will be aimed to explore the pace and intensity of the process of family change in the three already identified dimensions (e.g., population ageing, changing patterns of family formation and dissolution and changes in intergenerational dependency).
- Qualitative analysis (e.g., field interviews and documentary analysis) for the second phase of the research, aimed to explore how the interplay between social change, ideas and politics take place.

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