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Heejung Chung & Bart Meuleman

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European parents' attitudes towards public childcare provision: the role of current provisions, interests and ideologies

Heejeung Chung^a and Bart Meuleman^b

^aSchool of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research, University of Kent, Canterbury, UK;

^bInstitute for Social and Political Opinion Research, University of Leuven, Leuven, Belgium

ABSTRACT

Despite the large volume of literature on childcare provision across countries, individuals' attitudes and preferences concerning the role of government in the provision of childcare remain largely unexplored. This study examines how current policy provision structures, measured through objective and subjective indicators, both at the individual and national levels, influence the degree to which parents in European countries support public provision of childcare. The relative importance of current provision structures is then compared with other welfare attitude determinants; that is, self-interest and political attitudes. This is done using data from 22 European countries in 2008/2009 and a multilevel modelling technique. Results show that in general parents across Europe are largely supportive of public childcare provision. Furthermore, current provision structures, and people's assessment of it, are consistently related to parents' support for public childcare. Current provisions are salient factor explaining variance in childcare support (both at the individual and national levels) over and beyond the most commonly used frameworks, namely self-interest and ideologies. The results of this study provide evidence for a vicious and virtuous cycle in the relationship between policy provision and support, where investment in policies may drive up support while rolling back of policies may further decrease support.


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KEYWORDS Childcare; welfare attitudes; cross-national research; policy provision structure

1. Introduction

Changing labour markets and evolving family structures fuel the need for provision of childcare throughout Europe. Childcare provision not only

CONTACT Bart Meuleman  bart.meuleman@soc.kuleuven.be  Institute for Social and Political Opinion Research, University of Leuven, Parkstraat 45 Box 3601, B-3000 Leuven, Belgium

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allows women more freedom to participate in the labour market (Gornick 1999), but also serves the goals of increasing fertility rates, and enhancing cognitive development and social capacities of young children (Knijn and Van Oorschot 2008). The key focus of the existing literature has been on the roles governments actually take in providing childcare and their impacts on gender equality, familism and women's labour force participation (e.g. Bettio and Plantenga 2004; Ejrnæs 2011; Gornick *et al.* 1997). Individuals' attitudes and preferences concerning the role of government in the provision of childcare, on the other hand, remain largely unexplored (with some exceptions, Ainsaar 2012; Goerres and Tepe 2010, 2012; Meuleman and Chung 2012). Yet, knowledge regarding preferences for public childcare provision is highly relevant to understand policy developments, as public opinions can alter policy reforms through acting as a possible veto player and influence reform opportunities (Brooks and Manza 2006).

In this respect, the relationship between current provision and public support for welfare is a particularly vital one, with increasing evidence showing that current provision levels influence public opinion of the policies. Ahn and Kim (2014) explain how current provisions shape people's attitudes towards a policy by changing the perceptions of welfare as a right and welfare as a duty, using the case of pensions. Ellingsæter and Gulbrandsen (2007), more specifically, look at childcare policies in Norway to show how the quality and quantity of current provision was vital in the development of generous childcare policies. If policies and current provision structures shape public opinion on welfare and visa-versa, we can speculate a virtuous or vicious cycle of provision and attitudes. As yet, empirical evidence – especially from studies using larger number of countries – that substantiates this relationship is still limited. With this in mind, this paper examines parents' opinions on governments' responsibility in providing childcare across 22 European countries, with an emphasis on the role current provision structure plays. We used data from the fourth round of the European Social Survey (ESS) (2008/2009) covering 22 European countries. Multilevel models were used to explain how individual and country characteristics jointly shape attitudes towards childcare policies.

This research complements and extends previous studies (e.g. Ainsaar 2012; Goerres and Tepe 2012; Meuleman and Chung 2012) in the following ways. First, this paper focuses on the attitudes of parents with children under 18 years of age rather than on the opinions of the general public as was done in previous research. As primary target group of childcare provision, parents have diverging interests in and greater levels of information

about current childcare provisions compared to the rest of the population. As a result, parents are a more suitable research population when studying how support for childcare services and current provision are related. A second contribution is that, compared to other studies, we examine a much more comprehensive list of variables especially at the national level, based on the framework of current provision, interest/demands and ideologies/norms. We allow for different national dimension factors to compete against each other as well as compete within themselves to take into account any confounding factors. Within this framework, our focus and main contribution is to show how childcare policy preferences are related to current policy provisions as measured at both the individual level and national level, measured as objective and perceptive indicators.

2. Antecedents of preferences for public childcare provision: self-interest, ideologies and current provision

2.1. Current policy provision and welfare support

Previous studies have posited that support for government intervention can be explained by self-interest and ideological preferences (Blekesaune and Quadagno 2003; Hasenfeld and Rafferty 1989). In this paper, we argue that current policy provision is the crucial third aspect that helps us understand why individuals support public provision.

The relationship between current provision levels and support for specific welfare policies is not always straightforward, and both a positive and negative relationship can be expected (see also van Oorschot and Meuleman 2012). Initially, it might be assumed that the relationship between provision and support is a positive one. Generous provisions that are perceived as good might be 'rewarded' with higher levels of welfare support, while minimal schemes of poor quality might go 'punished' by the public withdrawing its support. However, according to Wlezien's (1995) thermostat model of welfare support, it could equally be suggested that insufficient provision would elicit greater demand of government intervention to improve the lacking provision. Also, as was assumed in the welfare state 'critical overload theories' of the 1970s (e.g. Kumlin 2007; van Oorschot 2002), generous welfare provisions may create the perception of being overburdened with the taxes necessary to uphold such extensive programmes. These 'improvement' and 'overburden' reactions would imply a negative rather than a positive relationship between the current provision and the support for public policy intervention.

Empirically, there is evidence to show that the generosity of unemployment benefits is inversely proportionally related to public support (van Oorschot and Meuleman 2014), while pension levels were positively related to public support (Ahn and Kim 2014). One point to note is that previous studies test these mechanisms in relation to ‘old risk’ policies developed in the early stages of the welfare state. With regard to ‘new risk’ policies, such as childcare and family policies, a different mechanism may be at play. Ellingsæter and Gulbrandsen (2007) examine the interplay between the preferences regarding public childcare and policy structures in Norway. Norway has been an example of how the gradual expansion of good quality childcare has changed the attitudes and expectations of parents towards day care centres in an adaptive process. Ellingsæter and Gulbrandsen hint at the influence of a critical mass in the development of public childcare support. The first attempts in childcare services expansion were objected to, with the psychological and pedagogical development of children cited as rationale (Leira 1992). Over time, however, as a growing number attended day care centres and such provision became normalized, public childcare gained broad support from all socio-economic strata (Ellingsæter and Gulbrandsen 2007). This leads us to expect a non-linear mechanism in childcare provision and support.

Theoretically, a case can be made for the existence of policy feedback (i.e. policies affecting attitudes, Bendz 2015; Kumlin and Stadelmann-Steffen 2014) as well as policy responsiveness effects (i.e. attitudes shaping policies, Brooks and Manza 2006). In other words, the countries where parents are more supportive of public childcare provision could be the ones where governments have tried their utmost to provide wider coverage, rather than policy influencing attitudes. Our study, using cross-sectional data, cannot answer the question through which causal mechanism the policy–attitudes nexus operates – in fact both mechanisms may well operate simultaneously. Irrespective of the direction of the causality, the direction of the alignment between current childcare provisions and support for childcare is of importance for this study.

When examining support for current policy provision, alternative resources for care may also be a factor. Informal care possibilities may act as a competing opportunity structure for individuals (Goerres and Tepe 2012; Meuleman and Chung 2012), changing the relationship between current public provision and support for government intervention. Individuals may not feel a great need to call for public childcare when sufficient informal care possibilities are present. However, the use

of informal care may result from the lack of public provision, thus indicating a greater hidden demand for more government intervention.

2.2. Self-interest and ideologies

In the prevailing welfare attitudes studies, the two most prominent factors explaining one's support for the welfare state are self-interest and ideologies. Self-interest theory entails that those who are currently, or are most likely to benefit from the public policy will be most supportive of it (Blekesaune and Quadagno 2003; Knijn and Van Oorschot 2008; Svallfors 1997). In the case of childcare policies, we expect gender, family structure, employment situation and income level to indicate self-interest towards childcare, and to be relevant (see also, Goerres and Tepe 2012; Meuleman and Chung 2012). Women usually hold the main responsibility for providing care to children (Bettio and Plantenga 2004; Daly and Lewis 2000), thus they are more likely to benefit from public childcare provision. Similarly, families with young/pre-school children would benefit most from childcare provision and may be more supportive. Support might also be relatively widespread among families with primary school age children, who are not necessarily making use of childcare facilities anymore but who have, based on previous experience, developed a positive preference for such provision. The preference towards public childcare may also be more prevalent among single parents who do not have a partner to share some of the care duties. The amount of time that parents spend working is a major determinant of the need for childcare and consequently will be expected to have an impact on support for public childcare. However, given that women are the main providers of care we believe that mothers' working hours will be more relevant in explaining support. Finally, individuals with insufficient income or other resources to acquire care service through the market will be the beneficiaries of public childcare services, and thus more likely to be supportive of it.

Self-interest can also be examined at the national level in terms of aggregate demands and public interest (Blekesaune and Quadagno 2003). First, countries where fertility rates are high may have higher levels of support for state provision due to higher levels of demand for childcare. Second, childcare provision is closely linked to mother's employment (Ejrnæs 2011; Gornick *et al.* 1997), as such, countries with larger proportions of women participating in the labour market can be expected to show high demands for public childcare. However, support for public childcare may fall in countries with high rates of female part-

time work, since this may entail more opportunities in the labour market to adjust working hours to meet work and childcare demands at the same time (Del Boca 2002; Visser 2002). Lastly, we expect affluent countries to be the ones with more scope to allocate their resources to childcare services, and support for public childcare to be stronger in these countries.

Besides interests that are based on rational calculus, individuals' ideological positions have been shown to be important predictors of welfare attitudes (Blekesaune 2013; Edlund 2006). This is based on the idea that 'attitudes towards the welfare state are rooted in more general value systems regarding the proper relationship between the individual, the state and other institutions' (Blekesaune and Quadagno 2003: 416). Previous studies have used political partisanship (Goerres and Tepe 2012) or economic individualism (Blekesaune and Quadagno 2003; Blekesaune 2013) to determine why individuals support a certain policy or welfare states in general. We explore two attitudinal factors relevant to our understanding of parents' support for public childcare policies. First, in line with the work of Pfau-Effinger (1998), those with egalitarian gender ideologies can be expected to endorse public childcare, while those with a more conservative view on mothers' employment would expect women rather than the government to be the main providers of childcare. Following the arguments put forward by Hakim (2000), who stresses that the work-lifestyle preferences of women in particular affect childcare, we expect the effect of mothers' views on female employment to be stronger on support for childcare than that of fathers.

A second important ideological factor is the view that income equality is desirable for societies. The principle of equality is one of the pillars of welfare provision – although different welfare regimes emphasize this principle to a different extent (Esping-Andersen 1990). In previous studies, the endorsement of the principle of equality has been identified as an important catalyst in support for welfare in general (Feldman and Zaller 1992; van Oorschot, Reeskens and Meuleman 2012; Kulin and Meuleman 2015). Therefore, we expect those who believe that society should be more equal in terms of economic resources and standard of living are more likely to support government intervention in childcare provision. Ideological dispositions also function as a nationally shared normative framework that may guide individual preferences on various issues (van Oorschot, Reeskens and Meuleman 2012; Uunk 2015), including childcare provision. We expect that in countries where egalitarian gender norms prevail, and where preferences for equality are widespread, parents are more likely to support public childcare, regardless of their own ideological inclinations.

3. Data and methods

3.1. Dataset

To compare support across Europe for government intervention in the domain of childcare services, we made use of the welfare attitudes module included in the ESS, round 4 (2008–2009). This international survey was fielded in 28 different countries, but due to missing data on key contextual indicators, 6 countries were dropped – see Supplementary data for a list of the remaining 22 countries. For theoretical reasons explained above, we select the respondents with at least one child under 18 years of age, which leads to a total sample size of 10,738.

3.2. Variables

3.2.1. Dependent variable

Individual support of public childcare provision was operationalized through the question ‘How much responsibility do you think governments should have to ensure sufficient childcare services for working parents?’ (answer scale: 0 – not government’s responsibility at all to 10 – completely government’s responsibility). In this question, childcare services could refer to a whole range of policy interventions, and the age of the children to be cared for is not specified. Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to assume that respondents interpreted this item as primarily referring to policies guaranteeing access to formal childcare services primarily for pre-school children, as well as taking primary financial responsibility for its provision.

3.2.2. Independent variables

Current policy provision of childcare was measured through objective and subjective indicators, at both national and individual levels. At the national level, we include the weekly average number of hours of *formal care* and *informal care for children 0–6 years old* (i.e. pre-school children), and the *effective parental leave scheme* (i.e. the duration of paid parental leave including maternity leave multiplied by the income replacement rate of the parental leave benefit). As a subjective indicator, individuals’ *assessment of current childcare service provision* was measured by the item ‘What do you think overall about the provision of affordable childcare services for working parents?’ (ranging from 0 – extremely bad to 10 – extremely good). This variable was included both at the individual and at the national level, the latter indicating parents’ aggregate assessment of the current provision.

At the individual level, *self-interest* was measured through: *gender, age* (four categories; 15–29; 30–39; 40–49; over 50), *highest educational degree* (primary or below; lower secondary; higher secondary and higher non-tertiary; tertiary) and *subjective household income* (from 1 – very difficult on present income to 4 – living comfortably on present income). Regarding household composition, we take into account the *age of the youngest child* in three categories of pre-school aged (<6), primary school aged (6–11) and older/secondary school aged (12–17), the *number of children* (four categories: one child; two children; three to four children; five or more children) and a dummy variable indicating whether there is a partner present in the household (*living with a partner*). Employment situations were measured by the *weekly average number of working hours*. To measure national level interest/demand, the presence of young children in society was indicated by the *total fertility rate*. *Employment rates for females between the ages of 25–54* was used as indicator of female employment, and *part-time employment of females* (as a percentage of total female employment) was used to indicate the existence of alternative work–life balance strategies. Lastly, *GDP per capita measured as purchasing power standards (PPS)* was used to measure the affluence of the country and indicate more resources to be used for childcare provision.

Ideology – Attitude towards female employment was the average of two 5-point agree–disagree statements concerning how desirable it is for women to be active in the labour market (‘A woman should be prepared to cut down on her paid work for the sake of her family’ and ‘When jobs are scarce, men should have more right to a job than women’). Endorsement of the *principle of equality* was measured as the average of two items referring to how harmful or acceptable monetary inequality is, namely ‘Large differences in people’s incomes are acceptable to properly reward differences in talents and efforts’ and ‘For a society to be fair, differences in people’s standard of living should be small’ (reverse coded). These ideology variables are included at the individual level and the national level as national averages to measure norms.

All contextual data were retrieved from the Eurostat Statistics Database or the ESS data itself with the exception of the parental leave scheme, which comes from the Multilinks database. See Supplementary data for descriptive statistics of the individual level variables and Supplementary data for context variable scores.

3.3. Statistical models

We used multilevel techniques that take the hierarchical structure of the ESS data (citizens nested within countries) into account. The analyses were weighted (design weight) for differences in sample design. All independent variables, except for the dummy variables, were standardized.

With respect to modelling strategy, we started with an empty model and gradually added blocks of potentially relevant explanatory variables starting with the individual-level predictors. Due to the small sample size at the country level, we were not able to include all contextual variables simultaneously in the model. Instead, we started by including the contextual predictors one at a time. Second, the three blocks of context variables (i.e. current provision, interest and ideology) were tested separately to select the strongest predictors of each block. These strongest predictors were then included in the final model.

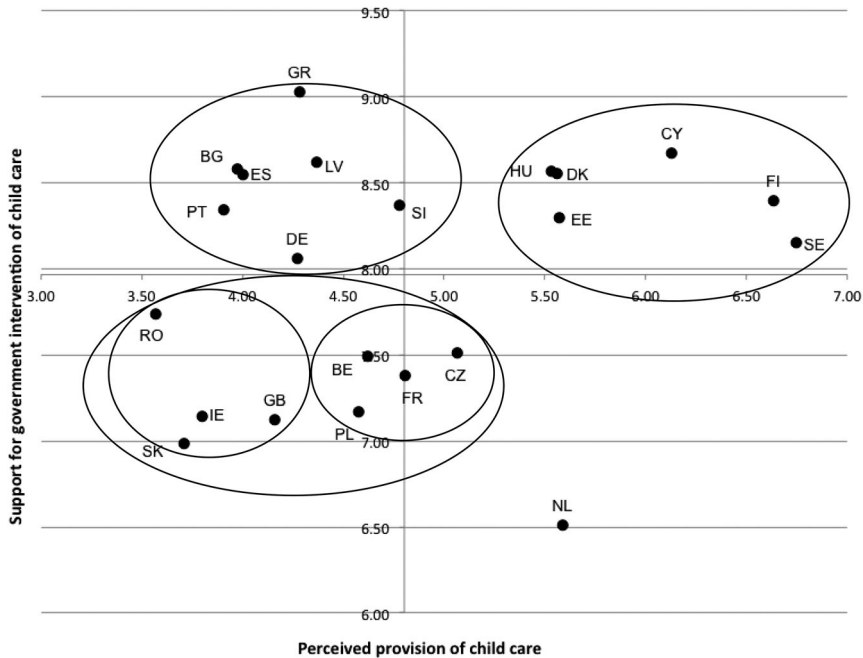


Figure 1. Parents' assessment of childcare service provision and support for public childcare— country averages.

Note: The axes of this figure intersect on the averages of both variables in the pooled data. The grouping of the countries is supported by a hierarchical cluster analysis on the country means.

4. Findings

4.1. Descriptive analyses

Figure 1 shows that parents' support for public childcare is relatively high across all of Europe: the average support over all 22 countries is almost 8 on a 0–10 scale. Yet at the same time, the support varies considerably across countries (this finding is confirmed by an intra-class correlation of 10.5%). There is exceptionally low support for state intervention in childcare in the Netherlands. This reflects a care culture wherein the majority of the population believe that childcare for younger children should be provided by parents, especially the mother (Merens *et al.* 2011). Generally speaking, we can say that support is lowest in Western and Central Europe, somewhat higher in Northern Europe and even higher in the Southern European countries including Cyprus. Support in Eastern European countries is more varied.

Figure 1 also shows quite large cross-national difference in parents' assessment of the childcare services currently provided (with an average of 4.8 across all countries). A clear (aggregate) linear relationship between the assessment of, and support for, public childcare is absent at the national level. Instead, we discern three clusters of countries.¹ The first cluster has both a high assessment of childcare services provided in the country and high support for public childcare services (reward reactions). This group includes most of the Nordic countries, as well as Cyprus, Estonia and Hungary. The second cluster also show a relatively high support for public childcare provision yet parents assess the current service provision to be insufficient (improvement reactions). This group includes Southern Europe, Latvia, Bulgaria, Germany and Slovenia. In the last group of countries, parents assess the current provision to be insufficient and also show relatively low levels of support for public childcare provision (a punishment reaction). This group includes Czech Republic, Belgium, Poland and France as one sub-group, and Romania, Slovakia, Ireland and Great Britain as another. Both groups have similar levels of support for public childcare, yet the latter group assesses the current provision to be worse.

4.2. Explaining support: individual predictors

Model 1 examines various individual variables (see Table 1). As expected, parents' assessment of the existing childcare services is significantly

¹A hierarchical cluster analysis on the country means (Ward's method) confirms that three/four clusters can be distinguished among the 22 countries.

related to their support for public childcare. In fact, it is the strongest determinant of support, uniquely explaining 2.4% of inter-individual differences. However, we find a slightly convex positive relationship,

Table 1. Results of the multilevel models for parents' support for public childcare across 22 European countries – $N_i = 10,115$; $N_j = 22$ (Source: ESS 4th wave).

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
FIXED EFFECTS			
<i>Individual variables</i>			
Intercept	7.867***	7.865***	7.920***
Current provision			
Assessment childcare svcs	-0.111***	-0.112***	-0.106**
(Assessment childcare svcs) ²	0.234***	0.234***	0.236***
Self-interest			
Gender			
<i>male (ref.cat.)</i>	0.000	0.000	0.000
<i>female</i>	0.230***	0.231***	0.217***
Age			
16–29	-0.143	-0.143	-0.145
30–39 (<i>ref. cat.</i>)	0.000	0.000	0.000
40–49	-0.063	-0.063	-0.064
50+	0.031	0.029	0.009
Education			
<i>Primary</i>	0.014	0.011	0.012
<i>Lower secondary</i>	0.023	0.022	0.018
<i>Higher secondary (ref.cat.)</i>	0.000	0.000	0.000
<i>Tertiary</i>	-0.123**	-0.123**	-0.122**
Subjective income	-0.088**	-0.090**	-0.088**
Age youngest child			
<i>Under 6 (ref.cat.)</i>	0.000	0.000	0.000
6–11 years old	-0.148**	-0.147**	-0.132**
12–17 years old	-0.328***	-0.327***	-0.285***
Number of children (–18)			
1 child (<i>ref.cat.</i>)	0.000	0.000	0.000
2 children	-0.044	-0.044	-0.056
3 or 4 children	-0.175*	-0.176*	-0.145
5 children or more	-0.411*	-0.414*	-0.511**
Living with partner			
Yes	0.029	0.031	0.036
No (<i>ref.cat.</i>)	0.000	0.000	0.000
Working hours	-0.035	-0.035	-0.040
Working hours × female	0.112*	0.112*	0.122*
Ideology			
Principle of equality	0.195***	0.194***	0.194***
Attitudes female employment	0.010	0.007	-0.006
Attitudes fem. employ. × female	0.081*	0.082*	0.074*
<i>Country-level variables</i>			
Formal child care use		0.265*	
Assessment childcare svcs – country avg.			0.627*
RANDOM EFFECTS			
Var. random intercept (country level)	0.377***	0.3077***	0.2664***
Residual variance (individual level)	3.523***	3.5225***	3.4657***
% var. reduction country level	0.119	0.281	0.378
% var. reduction individual level	0.052	0.052	0.068
Deviance	40283.9	40279.5	38263.0

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Note: model 3 excludes cases from the Netherlands.

supporting punishment and reward mechanisms at the individual level: As the perceived quality of childcare increases, the support for public childcare increases exponentially.

A wide range of interest and ideology factors helps explain support for public childcare. As predicted, mothers are significantly and substantively more supportive of public childcare provision compared to fathers. This is may be because mothers often continue to bear the main responsibilities for the care of children. Age does not make a huge difference once other factors that are more closely linked to self-interest in childcare are taken into account. Parents with a tertiary education degree or a higher (subjective) income show lower support for public childcare provision. This group might be more concerned about an increase in tax rates that may arise from greater government intervention and prefer private childcare instead.

Regarding household composition, parents with younger children are more supportive of public childcare, most likely because public childcare usually involves care of children below compulsory school age. Contrary to our hypotheses, however, parents with one or two children are most supportive of public childcare provision whereas larger families (especially with five children or more) are considerably less supportive. This unanticipated finding might reflect a selection effect: Possibly, parents with three children or more make a deliberate choice to invest a substantial part of their life in child-rearing. Larger families may also be more likely to have one parent, at least partially, opting out of the labour market to take up childcare responsibilities, decreasing the need for formal childcare. Also contrary to our hypothesis, the presence of a partner does not influence one's support for government's intervention in childcare provision. This may be because not living with a partner itself need not necessarily generate a stronger need for childcare. Rather, it may be the lack of (additional) income that is important in explaining support from single parent households.

Our analysis shows a gender-specific impact of employment situations on support for childcare policies. For fathers, the number of hours worked does not make a significant difference to their support for public childcare. For mothers, longer working hours increase the support for public childcare considerably.² This can be explained by the intra-familial work division, wherein responsibility for childcare often resides with mothers.

²Contrast estimation shows that for female respondents the effect of the variable *working hours* ($-0.035 + 0.112 = 0.077$) is statistically significant ($p = .006$).

Mothers' employment and working hours are more reliant on public childcare provision (Gornick *et al.* 1997).

All ideological variables are influential in explaining parents' support for public childcare. Those who uphold the principle of equality are also in favour of public childcare, and this variable is also one of the strongest predictors in this model. The effect of attitudes towards female employment, on the other hand, is divided across gender lines. Mothers who have progressive attitudes towards female employment are more supportive compared to mothers with a more conservative view.³ For mothers, public childcare is not only a matter of one's own self-interest but also on issues regarding women's emancipation in the labour market. Interestingly, for fathers support for public childcare is not linked to their support for increasing women's labour market positions.

To summarize, individual differences in childcare support among European parents are driven by interests, ideologies and assessments of current provisions. The relative importance of these three frameworks is hard to compare directly, however. After all, ideologies and assessments of current provision are subjective variables, while interest factors are operationalized as objective social-structural characteristics that have a larger empirical distance towards the dependent variable. Yet, the main contribution is that this analysis shows that evaluations of current provisions are systematically related to parents' childcare support over and beyond interests and ideologies (i.e. the two most commonly used frameworks in welfare attitudes research).

4.3. Explaining support: contextual predictors

Given the limited number of countries, we tested three groups of national context variables (i.e. current provision, self-interest/demand and norms) separately by including each context variables individually into the model, as well as including them in bundles (see Table 2).

Interestingly, although demands and norms at the country level have been shown to explain cross-national variation in welfare state support in previous studies (see section 2), we find that they are not as effective in explaining support for public childcare. When included in the model individually, proportion of part-time employment is the only demand variable that looks significant. However, when the very specific case of

³Contrast estimation shows that for female respondents the effect of attitudes towards female employment ($0.010 + 0.081 = 0.091$) is statistically significant ($p = .00012$).

Table 2. Explaining parent's support for public childcare through context variables for 22 European countries in 2008/9 (source: ESS 4th wave) – parameter estimates.

Variable	Included individually	Model 2–1: Current provision	Model 2–2: Interests	Model 2–3: Ideologies
Current provision				
Assessment childcare svcs – country avg.	0.480 [†]	0.330		
Assessment childcare svcs – country avg. (without NL)	0.627*			
Parental leave schemes	0.047	0.046		
Use of informal child care	0.003	0.177		
Use of formal child care	0.265*	0.297**		
Use of formal child care (without NL)	0.243*			
Interests				
GDP per capita (in PPS), 2008	–0.082		0.462**	
Total Fertility Rate	–0.149		–0.258	
Female employment rate (24–54)	0.065		0.139	
Female part-time employment	–0.259*		–0.521***	
Female part-time employment (without NL)	–0.143			
Ideologies				
Principle of equality – country average	0.470			0.440
Att. female employment – country average	–0.174			–0.071

[†] $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Note: the first column each variable is included in the model one at a time – and the second to fourth columns, the variables are included as a block together in one model.

the Netherlands – where more than three quarters of all employed women are in part-time contracts – is left out of the model, the effect of part-time employment becomes statistically insignificant. GDP per capita also seems to be significant when other demand variables are controlled for (supporting the hypothesis parents in richer countries are more supportive of public childcare). However, it is only significant when other demand variables are included in the model, which signals possible collinearity problems. In addition, unlike what is found at the individual level, no significant context effects are found for principles of equality and attitude towards women's labour market participation. Thus, although individual attitudes on egalitarianism and gender norms are important in explaining individual support for public childcare, no contagion effects are found at the national level.

On the other hand, the current provision of childcare, measured both through objective and subjective indicators at the country level are related to cross-national differences in public childcare support of parents. The use of formal childcare, along with the composition effects,

explains up to 28% of the country-level variance (see Model 2 in Table 1). Aggregate assessment of the current childcare services on the other hand only becomes significant when outlier Netherlands (with its very low support for public childcare) is excluded from the model. Once the Dutch sample is removed, this variable is even more influential compared to formal provision, explaining up to 38% of the cross-national variance, together with the individual level variables (Model 3). When both variables are included in the model, due to the high correlation between the two factors (0.43), both become insignificant (with or without the Dutch sample). Both policy provision variables have a positive relationship with support for public childcare, reflecting a punishment–reward mechanism, similar to that found at the individual level. In countries without much childcare provision or where on average, current childcare services are assessed as being insufficient, parents are least supportive towards public childcare. In countries with generous provision of childcare, and on average positive evaluations of current services prevail, parents are most supportive of public childcare, confirming on a larger scale what was found in previous country case studies (Ellingsæter and Gulbrandsen 2007). Of course, the opposite causal mechanism could play, that is, greater parents' support for public childcare leading to wider public provision. It is difficult to untangle the causal mechanism using cross-sectional data, yet our analysis provides a good first look at the relationship at play.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, we have examined the support for public childcare provision of parents across 22 European countries. We find that although generally parents in Europe are rather supportive of the idea that governments should take responsibility in providing childcare for working parents, there are notable differences across countries as well as individuals. In this paper, we focused on how current policy provision is systematically related to policy support. At the individual level, interests, ideologies and assessments of current childcare together are found to explain part of parents' policy support. In general, it seems that interest factors have a comparable impact on childcare support compared to support for other policy domains. The effects of education we reported here, for example, are very similar to those reported on support for healthcare (Missinne, Meuleman and Bracke 2013), pensions or unemployment benefits (van Oorschot and Meuleman 2012). Along similar lines, a previous study by Svallfors

et al. (2012) already found that general interest factors such as age and class have quite similar impacts across a series of policy domains (including childcare).

The main contribution of our analysis is, however, to show that current childcare provisions and individual's evaluations of it explain policy support in addition to the often-used frameworks of interests and ideologies. At the national level, indicators of current provisions – namely the use of formal care and aggregate assessments of current provisions – are important factors explaining support for public childcare, while no national-level interest or ideology effects are found. The results of this study help expand the findings of previous studies based on specific country cases (Ellingsæter and Gulbrandsen 2007) and those based on 'old risk' policies (Ahn and Kim 2014; van Oorschot and Meuleman 2012), where current welfare structures have been shown to be important in shaping welfare attitudes. What we can add to the previous findings is that populations' subjective assessment of provision is also important in explaining why individuals support certain welfare policies (see also, Bendz 2015).

Obviously, our analysis contends with several limitations that could be improved upon in future research. First and foremost, our cross-sectional design does unfortunately not make it possible to make claims about the causal direction of the policy–attitudes relations. Nevertheless, irrespective of the direction of the causality, our main conclusion that childcare provisions and support for childcare services are aligned, remains intact. A second shortcoming concerns the item used to measure childcare support. First of all, the use of a single item could lead to the presence of considerable amounts of random measurement error in the analysis. Second, the specific wording of the item is quite vague, in the sense that it does not refer to specific target groups (only pre-school children or not?) and or forms of childcare provision (e.g. facilities organized by the state vs. subsidizing private childcare initiatives). More specific survey items are needed to remediate this problem.

These limitations notwithstanding, the insights in the mechanisms shaping support for public childcare have several policy implications. Our analyses show that, in general, there is a great deal of support for public childcare provision amongst parents. This is especially true for working mothers, particularly those working long hours, and parents in lower socio-economic statuses. More importantly, we find evidence to show that the expansion of childcare provision can create a virtuous cycle for support. We find that support for public childcare by parents is shaped by both subjectively assessed and objectively measured current

provision structures. This connection exists above and beyond the impact of self-interest and ideological dispositions. At the national level, we can see that the larger current public childcare provision, and the more positively people assess it, the greater the support for it. Thus, governments' further investment in wider provision of good quality childcare has potentials to create a virtuous cycle, which drives up the assessment, then support and later demand for public childcare. Rolling back of childcare, on the other hand, may result in a vicious cycle where the support for public childcare decreases accordingly. Lastly, it is important to point out that the most commonly used factors/framework in explaining welfare attitudes – self-interest and ideologies – did not explain the variation in the support for public childcare to a large extent, especially when examining cross-national differences. This leads us to believe that there may be different mechanisms at play in explaining welfare support for new risks areas, such as childcare and work–life balance, as distinct from old risks – such as unemployment and old age. In this paper, we provide one of the first glimpses in understanding the nature of public support for childcare, but more in depth analyses are needed to develop a better framework in which we can understand the drivers of people's attitudes towards these new policy areas.

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Notes on contributors

Heejung Chung is Senior Lecturer in Sociology and Social Policy, at the School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research, University of Kent, UK. Her research interest lies in examining different labour market patterns and outcomes across European welfare states, focusing mostly on flexibility at work, work–life balance and job/employment insecurity.

Bart Meuleman is Associate Professor at the Centre for Sociological Research (CeSO), University of Leuven (Belgium). His research focuses on cross-national comparisons

of value and attitude patterns, such as ethnic prejudice, egalitarianism and support for the welfare state.

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