

CULTURE OR INSTITUTIONS? WHAT
INFLUENCES THE CARING CHOICES OF
YOUNG FAMILIES? A COMPARISON
BETWEEN THE CZECH REPUBLIC,
SLOVAKIA, SWEDEN AND NORWAY

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Methodology

- ◉ Interview mothers and fathers, whose children just began attending primary school
- ◉ Interviews in 2 Czech and 2 Slovak cities, + Stockholm and Norway
- ◉ SL more conservative than CR and NO more conservative than SE, so do these differences matter or do the similarities of their policies matter more?
- ◉ Total of 40 interviews in SL, 39 in CR, 40 in SW and 20 in NO
- ◉ Contacted parents via schools – one school in the center and one in the periphery of each city
- ◉ Asked about actual choices, and asked them hypothetical questions (what if....) and asked about their ideal solution

Theoretical Approach

- ⦿ What is the role of culture? (Do long-standing cultural values matter, or changes, such as post-modern values, individualization?)
- ⦿ What is the role of policies?
- ⦿ Historical institutional development and the mythology of threeness (implies an interaction between institutions and culture) in the CR and SL
- ⦿ In SW and NO: policies promote certain values which are generally accepted, but not completely acted out
- ⦿ Post-modernization/ individualization also helps explain the difference between the Nordic and CEE countries

Basic Conclusions

- Institutions have a great influence over policy choices and they also influence culture
- The greater level of post-modern values and individualization in Sweden and Norway has led to greater variation in views than among Czechs and Slovaks
- Relatively long parental leaves can support gender equality *if* they are generous and encourage fathers to share in the leave time.

CR & SL: Mythology of Threeness

- Kindergartens for children over three historically popular, because part of the nationalist project (Volkskindergarten)
- Nurseries built out under communist rule, so associated with communism
- Nurseries moved to Ministry of Health, became mini-hospitals, less popular
- Introduction of "extended" maternity leaves until the children were three
- So already under communist rule, the myth arose that it is "natural" for mothers to stay at home doing the first three years

How long should children stay at home?

- Vast majority believe in threeness, but a few would consider children part-time after two years
- Only one was positive to sending a child under 2 years to daycare
- Yet, all were very supportive of kindergartens
- “In my opinion the child should stay with his or her **mother** as long as possible, but on the other hand when it's time for the child to go to the **kindergarten**, the **collective is needed** as well so that child can learn. I think it's convenient to stay with the wife until the age of three and then to go to a kindergarten. Because if the child stays with the mother until the age of six at home, it misses a lot of things. It doesn't have a contact with other children and so it can't learn many new things. So I think it's good like this .”

Positive toward Nurseries

- 5 of 40 in SL thought children under 3 can attend public daycare and 3 of 39 in CR. 2 in each country supported private solutions
- Those, who sent their child to a nursery (for financial reasons, such as divorced)
- One person, who had foreign friends, who had good experiences in their country
- Thus, positive experiences can change attitudes

Example of somebody who sent their child to a public nursery

[It was] Excellent. Completely fantastic! We even wrote them a commendatory letter because there were just two nurses and one helper for ten children. They always had enough for the children to do for the whole week. It was rather a motherly type of care where they held the children, cuddles with them. ... They were fantastic. Excellent! They welcomed the children by picking them up and giving them a kiss. At the same time, our daughter learned lots of songs, poems, and make great progress. We were very please

Can Fathers share?

- 6 men in each country thought ideally men should share, but no women thought so
- Only one (in Slovakia) thought men should share *and* the child should start daycare before 3
- Were asked what would do if father could receive 100% of his salary
- Some fathers were positive to the idea if there were no economic losses (12 of 20 in SL and 13 of 19 in CR)
- Mothers were much more negative, either because they do not trust the fathers or because they want to be at home for three years (only 4 of 20 in each country)
- They had great difficulty in differentiating between the current situation and hypothetical ones

The problems of imaging a different situation

- We asked the parents if they would have done anything differently if they received 100% of their income while going on parental leave and they could divide the parental leave as they would like
- a female journalist (who became a teacher after having children, so she could work part time) – replied “I don’t think so because my income was ridiculously small compared to my husband’s, and that is still the case even today”

Three cases of fathers spending some time at home

- One stayed at home for one month, but did not like it so returned to work (women do not have that option)
- One stayed at home to take care of a sick child after she was three, but although the mother admits he did a good job, she is still against fathers going on parental leave
- One shared, but child also attended a nursery

Conclusions for Czech and Slovakia

- Surprising lack of "individualization" and instead tendency to both choose and favor the threeness solution, based on the mother staying at home.
- Difficulty in differentiating between the present situation and hypothetical ones.
- Czechs more likely to support father leaves (cultural difference?)
- Slovak women more likely to return to work before 3 (worse economic situation, shorter leave time)
- Views can change with positive experiences.

Sweden and Norway: policies promoting gender equality

- ◎ Great similarities in policies despite cultural differences
- ◎ Norway culturally more conservative, religious, anti-immigrant parties etc.
- ◎ Policies promote gender equality:
 - Insurance-based leaves (12 months NO, 13 months SW)
 - Father quotas (1 month NO—now 3—2 months SW)
 - High access to daycare for children over 1

Post-Modern Values

- ◎ Scores on self-expression:
 - SW 2.09
 - CR .38
 - SL -.43
- ◎ Gender equality
- ◎ Autonomy (individualization)
- ◎ Less materialist (so men more likely to be willing to stay at home)
- ◎ So if post-modern values matter we would expect greater support for shared caring in SW and NO and greater variation

Great Support for Daycare

- Basic support for the institutional arrangements
- Only 2 cases of sending children to daycare at the age of 3
- Individualization: most parents thought the best age for starting daycare depends on the child's individual development
- But the vast majority thought it was ideally between 15-24 months
- Differs from policies as leaves time is paid for only 12/13 months
- But the system is designed to be flexible, so one can stay at home longer and receive less money per month; thus they are still within the institutional bounds of existing policies

Comparison to CR & SL

- ⦿ As in CR and SL most reasoned in terms of what is best for the children rather than in terms of gender equality
- ⦿ But since different institutional arrangements promote different norms, the ideal age for children is perceived much differently

Example

- ◎ ... we would have been able to afford to stay at home longer with A, but we would not have wanted to either for our sake or for A's. This is because these days all children go to daycare. ... [So daycare is important] so they will experience being in a community (consultant, Stockholm, 49 years)

Parental Leaves

- ⦿ Almost all think that fathers should share in the parental leave time (compared to very few in the CR and SL)
- ⦿ A large minority thought it was important for fathers to share equally
- ⦿ Yet, only about 1/3 of the fathers took more than the quota leave time

Obstacle 1: Length of time/ biological norms

- Length of leave time: almost all believed that the mother should breastfeed at least 9 months (some thought 12 months)
- In *all* cases in which the fathers shared rather equally, the child stayed at home for much longer than the 12-13 month period
- The vast majority claimed they would share the leave time much more equally if it were 24 months (because of breast-feeding)
- This goes against many feminist scholars, who claim that long leave times hurt women (it depends on whether the leaves are generous or not and whether there are father quotas)

Obstacle 2: career pressures

- ⦿ Some fathers claimed they felt pressure from their employer/colleagues
- ⦿ Some fathers claimed that something important happened in their career, such as being invited to join a scientific expedition, getting accepted to a university program etc. (But this option does not exist for women)

Obstacle 3: Stretching

- Fathers often only took the quota period.
- In Norway using this was often equated with “sharing”
- This was justified in that by “equal roles” they meant more the period *after* the parental leave
- Many men only took the quota period, but also they did so in connection with vacations, so the vacations became longer
- Since have 8 years to take the leave, they often spread the quota period over many years rather than staying at home for a long period
- Of course, in these cases, the men continued to have more traditional gender views, but they also know it is not politically correct

Hypothetical role of policies

- ⦿ As already noted, most parents claimed they would have shared the leave time much more equally if it were two years
- ⦿ By contrast, a majority also said they would have stayed at home a shorter period or had less children if there were no parental leave
- ⦿ This is similar to CR and SL although much less there claimed that fathers would go on leave if it were 2 years and paid 100% of their salary.

Conclusion: the role of culture and institutions

