Children, Changing Families and Welfare States
Children, Changing Families and Welfare States

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1. Introduction: children in the context of changing families and welfare states

Jane Lewis

The nature of the relationship between children, parents and the state has been central to the growth of the modern welfare state and has long been a problem for western liberal democracies. Historically, children have been conceptualised as belonging to the private world of the family and thus to their parents, and policymakers have been preoccupied with the question: in what circumstances can, or should, the state intervene to protect children or to ensure that opportunities exist for their development? Many governments have been concerned that state intervention on behalf of children will serve to relieve parents of their responsibilities, and it has often proved difficult to establish a relationship that is not adversarial. As Hendrick (1990) has pointed out, such issues have played an important part in defining the very meaning of modern childhood. More recently, there has been increased emphasis on the idea that collective investment in children is crucial to the welfare of society, leaving open the extent to which the welfare of the child \textit{qua} child is a central consideration. This has raised additional questions about how far children’s views are taken into account at a time when academic commentators have been stressing the importance of listening to the voice of the child.

At the level of the individual household, the family has tended to be left alone except when a child has been abused or neglected, or when the child has been considered to constitute a (criminal) threat. In these instances the state has taken action to remove the child. But commentators have mounted a strong defence of ‘family privacy’ in liberal democracies (for example, Elshtain 1990; Mount 1983), although as Gordon (1988) showed in her historical study of social work/domestic violence in Boston, state intervention by embryonic social workers at the household level was often taken on behalf of the powerless – women and children – in the context of an essentially patriarchal family form.
But the nature of the relationship between child, parent and state has
developed very differently in different nation states. English-speaking coun-
tries have had much more suspicion of state intervention in the family, and
have tended historically to limit direct intervention not only at the house-
hold level but also in respect of the collective support of children via cash
benefits and services, particularly childcare services. Only the USA failed
to develop any system of universal ‘family allowances’ or child benefits,
which provide (varying amounts) of recognition as to the cost of raising a
child, but the care of children has been much more likely to be treated as a
‘family’ (usually women’s) responsibility in large tracts of Europe as well as
North America. In the UK, for example, the problem of childcare was not
considered to be an issue for state policy until the late 1990s; men and
women were free to enter the labour market, but were expected to make
their own arrangements regarding care for their children. This sort of
approach has contrasted markedly with that in other Northern and
Western European countries, where it has been considered first, a duty on
the part of the state to support children financially and in respect of their
care; and second, where this duty is seen as one to be undertaken in part-
nership with parents, particularly in the Scandinavian countries.

Nevertheless children have come to the fore on policy agendas in recent
years in most western states, with both the policy drivers and the policy
responses taking many forms. In respect of the former, first there is what has
been termed by most recent writers on welfare state change ‘the demographic
challenge’ (for example, Pierson 2001). All western countries are ageing,
birth rates are falling and the worsening dependency ratios mean that pen-
sions and health and social care for older people are becoming harder to
afford. Thus a major reason for putting children on the policy agenda is their
absence. Most recently policies addressing childcare and support have been
framed in terms of what might ‘enable’ parents to have the number of chil-
dren they desire (for example CEC 2005).2 Second, there has been a greater
interest in the relationship between family change and welfare state change.
Indeed, many analysts have begun to realise the extent to which household
change in respect of both family form and the contributions that adult men
and women make to families is driving policy (for example Esping-Andersen
1999), as well as being shaped by it. The first substantive section of this intro-
duction explores these relationships as a means of providing the background
for what is a fundamental shift in thinking about the orientation of welfare
states that also has major implications for children.

Broadly speaking, states have pursued what has been termed a more
‘active’ approach to social entitlements for adults by drawing a tighter link
between employment and social provision, and a stricter social investment
approach to welfare spending in general. In this context, considerable
attention has focused on children as future citizen workers, but responses have been varied and not necessarily of a piece. The tensions can be particularly stark in some countries at the household level. For example in the UK, as many commentators have pointed out, there have been moral panics about both the threat posed by a-social and criminal behaviour on the part of children, which has resulted in the effective lowering of the age of criminal responsibility to ten (the lowest in the EU), at the same time as there has been massive outcry about the failure to protect children abused by kin and carers (see James and James 2001 for a particularly critical review of UK government policy).

But the focus of this book is more on the implications of social policies to do with the arrangements for the care and support of children than on the nature of intervention at the level of the household, and here too it is possible to identify very different approaches. One major strand in the early English-speaking commentary on changes in family form, and the increasingly high rates of lone parenthood resulting from high and stable divorce rates and high rates of cohabitation, has been the perceived collapse of family values and the lack of proper socialisation of children, with the solution being sought in the traditional, married, two-parent family, and a rolling back of state support. This is a response that stands to have a detrimental impact on the welfare of children in poor families, certainly in the present generation, and that has proved more influential in the USA than in Europe, other than in the UK during the 1980s and early 1990s (Kiernan et al. 1998; Lewis 1997).

However, since the late 1990s, the demographic challenge has resulted in something of a premium being attached to children in EU member states, all of which have experienced a decline in their birth rates (the decline has been precipitous in Southern Europe; Douglass 2005). One of the most striking recent developments in European countries has been the emphasis on ‘investing’ in children as part of a social investment state (explored further in Part I of this book). A focus on children’s welfare because of their future role as adult citizens is hardly new in and of itself: the whole apparatus of state education was designed to do just that in the service of both the child, and also, crucially, of economic growth and social harmony. However, the reorientation of the modern welfare state toward expenditure that can be represented in terms of investment, whether in the form of active labour market policies (rather than ‘passive’ welfare benefits for the unemployed), or family policies to support children as future investments is new. This stronger focus on children looks as though it should bring unadulterated benefits. But one of the major issues that arises from this new orientation is how far the policy responses are actually child-centred.
A major issue in the literature on the sociology of childhood is the extent to which children are viewed as agents, rather than acted on. This literature, which is explored in the second substantive section of this introduction, has particular policy relevance in regard to measures that impact directly on households – for example, in respect of post-divorce parenting – but is important for our purposes in this book for the way in which it alerts us to how far policy responses are actually driven by concerns about the welfare of children per se. We explore two areas of policy of fundamental importance to children: their financial support and care. One of the issues we explore is how far such policies may be described as ‘instrumental’, in other words, how far they are about issues other than the welfare of the child, such as encouraging fertility and women’s employment, both of which are argued to be necessary to address the problem of the deteriorating dependency ratio, or encouraging economic growth, by investing in children’s early learning. Such a policy may bring very real benefits for children but, as this introduction argues, it is nevertheless important to consider what more genuinely child-centred policymaking might look like, and to take into account children’s own perspectives.

CONTEXT: FAMILY AND WELFARE STATE CHANGE

It is now widely recognised that family change, involving both demographic change and the changing nature of the contributions that adults make to families via paid and unpaid work, is of major importance to our understanding of the complex relationship between families, markets and states. Dramatic and interlinked changes in families and households, in labour markets, and in systems of social provision and regulation have been underway for some time now. Families and labour markets are moving towards increasing ‘individualisation’, with the erosion of traditional family bonds (manifested in low fertility, higher rates of divorce, extra-marital births, lone parenthood and increasing numbers of single-person households) and, with steadily rising rates of female participation in the workforce, more economic independence among women.

Traditional patterns of social provision in welfare states assumed the existence of a particular kind of family form, comprising a stable, two-parent, primary male earner and primary female carer model, and sought to provide protection against specified eventualities or risks – such as ill health and unemployment – within the confines of that family model. Core forms of social provision, for example in the form of social insurance benefits (and core approaches to family law, for example in respect of establishing fault and hence entitlement to alimony on divorce) rested on these