25. Effects of work-family policies on parenthood and wellbeing

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INTRODUCTION

Becoming a parent makes adults happier and healthier – or does it? While popular cultural beliefs bolster this claim, a wealth of studies beginning in the 1970s find that overall mothers and fathers typically report lower levels of wellbeing than childless adults across industrialized countries. This finding emerged in the context of substantial economic and social changes in work and family life over the past four decades: an increase in women's labor force participation, a decline in men's earnings, and a rise in dual-earner and single parent families (Kohler et al., 2006; McLanahan and Adams, 1989). The finding that nonparents report greater happiness than parents presents a puzzle for researchers because decades of scholarship suggest the opposite: since Durkheim's (1897) classic study of suicide, research has found repeatedly that social roles and relationships such as parenting have positive benefits for adults' mental health (House et al., 1988; Mirowsky and Ross, 2003). This anomalous finding is a relevant and timely policy issue given its possible association with high rates of childlessness, stress and work-family conflict for adults, and poorer outcomes for children (Aassve et al., 2005; Gornick and Meyers, 2003; Mather, 2012).

Some scholars have employed theories of mental health and suggest that the emotional and financial costs of contemporary parenthood outweigh the emotional rewards of having children (Balbo et al., 2012; Begall and Mills, 2011; Evenson and Simon, 2005; Liefbroer, 2005; McLanahan and Adams, 1989; Nomaguchi and Milkie, 2003; Woo and Raley, 2005). Yet, the experience of contemporary parenthood varies widely from country to country depending on the sorts of resources and social supports offered to parents (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Kahneman et al., 2010; Savolainen et al., 2001). For example, Scandinavian countries offer extensive support and socialize the cost of childrearing across society, while some Mediterranean countries and the United States offer minimal support, compelling parents to find private solutions to meet their families' needs (Gornick and Meyers, 2003; see also Chapter 8 by Rostgaard and Chapter 10 by Thévenon in this volume). Parenthood can be particularly taxing and stressful in countries that offer little support to parents (Kahneman et al., 2010), and scholars have long suggested that increased institutional support such as readily available childcare would greatly improve mothers' and fathers' psychological wellbeing (Bird, 1997).

Although recent scholarship has begun examining cross-national variation in the relationship between parenthood and wellbeing (Kahneman et al., 2010; Ono and Lee, 2013; Savolainen et al., 2001), we still know little about why the parenthood gap in wellbeing is larger in some countries than in others. We suggest that the parenthood gap in wellbeing is associated with state-provided public policies supporting families, and that this is the

most promising avenue for investigating country-level differences in parental status differences in happiness. In this chapter, we first review the literature on parental wellbeing in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries. Second, we discuss the findings of studies that have considered whether, and to what extent, work-family policies lessen the time costs, financial costs and psychosocial stress associated with parenting. We provide several empirical examples from our research. We conclude by suggesting avenues for future research that help move the work-family policy agenda forward by understanding the relationship between macro-level contexts and micro-level emotional processes for parents in OECD countries.

PARENTAL WELLBEING IN ADVANCED INDUSTRIALIZED COUNTRIES

Across developed countries, considerable research has documented a significant negative association between parenthood and emotional wellbeing (Gilbert, 2007; Hansen, 2012; Kahneman et al., 2004; McLanahan and Adams, 1989; Nomaguchi and Milkie, 2003; Simon, 2008; Stanca, 2012; Umberson et al., 2010). This association has been found in all household types, for both mothers and fathers, and across a number of dimensions of emotional wellbeing – including depression, anxiety, generalized distress, life satisfaction, and the frequency of everyday positive and negative emotions like happiness and anger (Ross and Van Willigen, 1996; see Hansen, 2012; Nelson et al., 2013; Umberson et al., 2010 for recent reviews). Yet, the personal and household characteristics of parents also matter (Aassve et al., 2012; Umberson et al., 2010; Woo and Raley, 2005). Although married and cohabiting parents report less stress than single parents (Aassve et al., 2012; McLanahan, 1983; Simon, 1998; Woo and Raley, 2005), research shows consistently that across marital status types, parents residing with minor children – whose time, energy and financial demands are highest – show lower levels of wellbeing than adults who do not reside with children (Evenson and Simon, 2005).

What about older parents whose children have left home? Common reasoning suggests that empty-nest parents might be happier than childless adults since the emotional benefits of parenthood are thought to be greatest when children have grown up and become independent. However, research in the United States does not support this claim: empty-nest parents do not enjoy greater emotional wellbeing than childless adults (Bures et al., 2009; Evenson and Simon, 2005; Koropeckyj-Cox, 2002; Milkie et al., 2008; Pudrovska, 2009). In fact, Evenson and Simon (2005) found that there is no type of parent (including custodial, non-custodial, and step-parents of both minor and adult children) reporting significantly better mental health than nonparents in the United States.

Why is parenthood so often associated with lower levels of emotional wellbeing? Parenthood, like other major adult social roles, provides individuals with an important sense of meaning and identity, personal gratification and social connections to others, which improve mental health (Nomaguchi and Milkie, 2003; Umberson and Gove, 1989; Umberson et al., 2013). But the emotional rewards of parenthood could be overshadowed by the stress of raising children. Theories operationalizing how stress affects mental health (Pearlin, 1989) have the greatest potential to explain the parenthood gap in emotional wellbeing. Because children increase adults' exposure to a number of stressors, parenthood

increases symptoms of anxiety, depression, distress and anger while decreasing positive emotions such as happiness.

Fawcett (1988) outlined three major types of burdens parents confront that undermine their emotional wellbeing: time costs, financial costs and psychosocial stress. First, parents who live with minor children experience substantial demands on their time and energy coupled with sleep deprivation (Avison et al., 2007; Nelson et al., 2013) and work-family conflict (Begall and Mills, 2011; Nomaguchi et al., 2005). The increased amount of time spent doing housework and caring for children decreases leisure time and time with one's spouse for married parents, which may decrease marital satisfaction (Claxton and Perry-Jenkins, 2008). In dual-earner households in which both parents work full time, parents experience high levels of time pressure, particularly in the United States (Mattingly and Sayer, 2006; Milkie et al., 2009; Nomaguchi, 2009).

Second, raising minor children at home is associated with increased financial strain (McCrate, 2005; Nelson et al., 2013; Warren and Tyagi, 2004). The added expense of having children can lead to economic hardship, which has negative repercussions for parents' psychological wellbeing (Mirowsky and Ross, 2003). For example, parents of young children in many countries have difficulties obtaining high-quality, affordable childcare (Bird, 1997; Kravdal, 1996; Ross and Mirowsky, 1988), while some parents of older children face the economic burden of financing children's higher education and independent living at the same time that they face their own retirement (Fingerman et al., 2012; Furstenberg et al., 2004; Warren and Tyagi, 2004). Low-income parents are exposed to additional sources of financial stress, such as the stress of living in unsafe neighborhoods with under-resourced schools, unreliable and inadequate daycare and healthcare for their children, and insufficient food (Edin and Kefalas, 2005; Heymann, 2000; Nomaguchi et al., 2005; Ross and Mirowsky, 1988).

Third, parents experience psychosocial stress from the daily ins and outs of parenting. Prolonged psychosocial stress is problematic because it can lead to poor performance, chronic fatigue, disinterest, dejection, lack of work motivation, memory and sleep disturbance, numbness, muscle pain, recurrent infections, and to chronic conditions like depression, diabetes and cardiovascular disease (Danielsson et al., 2012). Some research shows that women tend to experience greater stress and stronger negative shocks to wellbeing in the transition to parenthood (Nomaguchi and Milkie, 2003; Simon, 1992). Given that mothers still complete the majority of childrearing and housework in all industrialized countries, even when employed full time (Pettit and Hook, 2009), studies have explored whether wellbeing differs for mothers versus fathers in dual-earner households. The majority of studies show few differences (Evenson and Simon, 2005; Margolis and Myrskylä, 2011). While mothers report more work-family conflict (Gornick and Meyers, 2003) and less leisure time (Mattingly and Bianchi, 2003) than fathers do, fathers report more distress about the financial strains of parenting and the tension between breadwinning and spending time with children (Aumann et al., 2011; Simon, 1998).

Some aspects of parenting, like multitasking, are not experienced equally by mothers and fathers. Mothers spend on average ten hours more on multitasking per week than fathers, primarily on housework and childcare. These multitasking activities for mothers at home and in public lead to increased stress, negative emotions, work-family conflict and psychological distress (Offer and Schneider, 2011). At the same time, fathers' multitasking at home, which involves less housework and childcare, is not considered a negative

experience. A survey of 909 working women in Texas found that childcare ranked 16th out of 19 possible pleasurable activities (Kahneman et al., 2004), behind watching television, preparing food, napping, housework, shopping and talking on the phone. These stressors, unsurprisingly, are more acute for single parents than for married and cohabiting parents (Aassve et al., 2012; Avison et al., 2007; McLanahan, 1983; Meadows et al., 2008; Simon, 1998), helping explain why single parents report the lowest levels of emotional wellbeing of all parents. Simon and Caputo (n.d.) find that although adults experience greater emotional wellbeing and less emotional distress at different stages of parenthood than others, they find no overall advantages of parenthood for adults' health and happiness.

The majority of scholarship to date has focused on the *proximate* sources of stressors that mediate the association between parenthood and emotional wellbeing, such as sleep deprivation and financial strain. Nelson and colleagues (2013) present a parent wellbeing model that maps the psychological mechanisms that mediate this relationship, outlining both why and how parents experience more or less wellbeing than nonparents. Their model identifies both positive mediating mechanisms (purpose/meaning in life; human needs; positive emotions; social roles) and negative ones (negative emotions; financial strain; sleep disturbance; strained partner relationships).

In this chapter, we extend this model by zooming out to highlight the *distal* sources of stress – like childcare and parental leave – that are rooted in the larger policy context in which adults raise children. Prior research suggests that these distal factors help mediate the relationship between parenthood and wellbeing. For example, Bird (1997) finds that children in the United States do not increase the psychological distress of parents in and of themselves: rather, children are associated with greater social and economic burdens, which increase parents' levels of distress. She argues that if parents were relieved of the economic hardship associated with having children by providing more material support to parents, they would not display significantly higher distress levels than nonparents.

Given that parenting is found to have both positive and negative effects on wellbeing, 'it should be possible to decrease the psychological costs of parenting by reducing the burdens or constraints that overshadow the more rewarding aspects of raising children' (Bird, 1997, p. 810). Research supports this claim: publicly provided benefits such as a statutory right to reduced working hours when children are young and cash allowances to parents are shown to reduce some of the stressors such as very long work hours and financial distress associated with raising children to adulthood in industrialized countries (Gornick and Meyers, 2003; Heymann et al., 2007; Ray et al., 2009). We therefore theorize parenting as a stressor buffered by institutional support (Glass et al., 2016), and argue that attention to the larger sociopolitical context – particularly different work-family policies – provides further insight into why the emotional effects of parenthood vary from country to country. We present a modified and expanded version of Nelson et al.'s model of proximate sources of stress (Figure 25.1) to highlight the distal policy supports that might improve parents' wellbeing. We are interested specifically in how work-family policies might affect the psychological mechanisms that mediate the relationship between parenthood and wellbeing. For example, how might paid parental leave and subsidized childcare impact the mediating relationship of financial strain and work-family conflict on the wellbeing of parents versus nonparents?

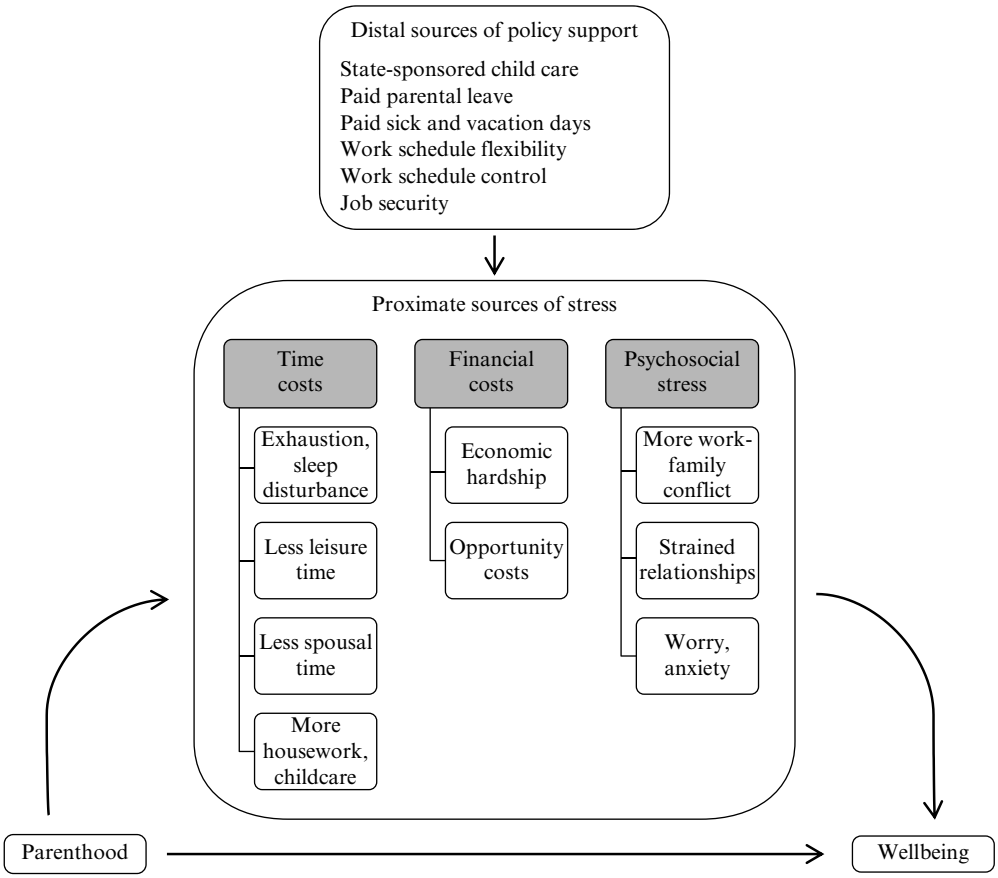


Figure 25.1 Distal supports and proximate stressors that mediate the relationship between parenthood and wellbeing

WORK-FAMILY POLICIES AND THE WELLBEING OF PARENTS VERSUS NONPARENTS

The welfare state regimes of advanced industrialized countries offer policy packages that vary widely in their levels of social support and resources to parents (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Kahneman et al., 2010; Savolainen et al., 2001). In the social-democratic regimes of Scandinavia, policies such as extensive childcare and workplace accommodations seek to reduce the direct financial costs and opportunity costs of parenthood, equalize the household division of labor, and ameliorate work-family conflict and overload (Gornick and Meyers, 2003; see also Chapter 15 by Eydal, Rostgaard and Hiilamo in this volume). Prior studies have identified these costs as the main sources of the parenthood deficit in emotional wellbeing across industrialized countries (Pollmann-Schult, 2014; Stanca, 2012). Within Europe, parents living in social-democratic countries tend to be happier than those living in countries with liberal or conservative welfare regimes (Aassve et al., 2012). In conservative

welfare state regimes, such as Germany, policies have long tended to support a male breadwinner/female homemaker model of family life. On the other end of the spectrum, few policy supports are available for families with children in liberal welfare state regimes such as the United States and some Mediterranean countries. In these regimes, parents contend with the demands of childrearing using their own resources and social networks (Glass, 2000; Gornick and Meyers, 2003; Simon, 2008; see also Chapter 13 by Pfau-Effinger, Chapter 14 by Woods and Chapter 16 by Jurado Guerrero and Naldini in this volume).

In terms of wellbeing, women in the social-democratic welfare states seem to suffer the least as a result of childbearing, whereas women in conservative and Mediterranean states suffer significantly more. For liberal welfare regimes, the results are more mixed, and depend on the definition of wellbeing used (Aassve et al., 2005). The United States in particular is exceptional in its lack of policy provisions to offset the costs of childrearing and work-family conflict (Gornick and Meyers, 2003). Only one federal policy – the 1993 Family and Medical Leave Act – is designed to help people meet the dual demands of work and family. In a study of 22 OECD countries, the United States had the largest subjective wellbeing penalty for parenthood (Glass et al., 2016).

Although broad welfare state typologies are useful to help understand the relationship between parenthood and wellbeing cross-nationally, we suggest that an examination of *specific* public policies intended to reduce parental stressors better illuminates which policy contexts alleviate the gap in wellbeing between parents and nonparents in OECD countries. Next, we review findings on which policies help reduce the time costs, financial costs and psychosocial stress associated with parenthood.

Policies Ameliorating the Time Costs Associated with Parenthood

Vacation and sick day policies help parents preserve time away from work to care for and spend time with children (Gornick and Meyers, 2003), and have been shown to dramatically improve wellbeing among parents (Heymann et al., 2007; Hyde et al., 1995). Using data from 22 OECD countries, Glass and colleagues (2016) report a strong policy effect of vacation and sick days on parental happiness. Paid parental or maternity leave also enable parents of newborns to leave work temporarily to care for an infant. These policies together reversed the negative impact of parenthood on happiness (Glass et al., 2016).

Work schedule flexibility policies allow workers to organize their time in a way that makes the combination of employment and parenting feel more compatible (see Chapter 11 by den Dulk, Yerkes and Peper in this volume). Three types of work schedule discretion tend to be available for employees: the ability to change the starting and ending times of the workday; the ability to take time off during the workday to attend to personal matters; and the ability to refuse overtime work (Golden et al., 2013). In countries like Denmark and Sweden, strong work-time policies allow parents to temporarily reduce their working hours or set maximum weekly work hours, and in the UK, 'right-to-ask' laws support flexible work schedules (Hegewisch and Gornick, 2008). Golden and colleagues (2013) find a significant association between schedule flexibility and workers' reported happiness – particularly the opportunity to take time off during the workday, and to a lesser extent, to vary daily starting and quitting times. Lower stress levels are also reported among employees who control their work hours and schedules (Grzywacz et al., 2008). Others find that both parents and nonparents benefit from living in countries with a larger

percentage of workplaces offering flexible schedules, with nonparents benefiting slightly more (Glass et al., 2016). They also find that work flexibility does not increase happiness more for parents than nonparents.

Policies Ameliorating the Financial Costs Associated with Parenthood

A large body of work suggests that parental wellbeing is strongly contingent on the financial costs borne by parents (Bird, 1997; Pollman-Schult, 2014). A comparative study of 94 countries finds that children's negative impact on parents' wellbeing is explained primarily by a large negative effect on household finances (Stanca, 2012). Although when approached globally, resident children are associated with decreased financial satisfaction for parents (Angeles, 2010), this is not the case in Nordic countries that have extensive work-family policy provisions (Hansen et al., 2009; Savolainen et al., 2001).

The cost and availability of childcare in particular has a strong influence on parents' wellbeing. Glass and colleagues (2016) find that policies lowering average childcare costs show the greatest potential to increase parental happiness. This is supported by Misra et al. (2007), who report that generous, high-quality childcare reduces financial strain and lowers poverty rates, particularly for single mother-headed families. In-depth interviews with middle-income working mothers in Sweden and the United States further support these findings: Swedish mothers did not report worrying about childcare costs, while American mothers reported enormous stress related to the high cost of daycare. American mothers spent significant time researching and securing care they could afford, and some were forced to quit work when they couldn't find affordable care (Collins, 2019). Without universal childcare, like Sweden has for children over 1 year old, no one daycare solution was reliable for American families – all were temporary arrangements that could shift unexpectedly. Daycare centers closed, babysitters started different jobs or moved, and relatives who helped out fell ill themselves. American mothers who had the most financial resources available to dedicate to childcare tended to be the happiest with the solutions they found. A wealth of research demonstrates that low-cost childcare improves parental wellbeing both by enhancing incomes and reducing stress (Ross and Mirowsky, 1988; Savolainen et al., 2001; Stanca, 2012).

Pollman-Schult (2014) reported that the financial costs of children negatively impact men's life satisfaction in particular, especially when the mother has left the labor force. This echoes the finding that the perceived financial costs associated with parenthood have a strong effect on men's entry into parenthood – negatively impacting countries' fertility rates (Liefbroer, 2005). Together, these findings suggest that both men's interest in starting a family and their life satisfaction after having children are deeply impacted by the financial aspects of parenthood (Pollman-Schult, 2014). More broadly, child benefits – which vary drastically from country to country – play an important role in ameliorating poverty for families (see Chapter 7 by Bradshaw in this volume).

Policies Ameliorating the Psychosocial Stress Associated with Parenthood

In countries that offer little policy support to parents, parenthood is particularly emotionally taxing and stressful (Kahneman et al., 2010). Insofar as work-family policies (i.e., parental leave, paid vacation and sick days, flexible work schedules, subsidized public

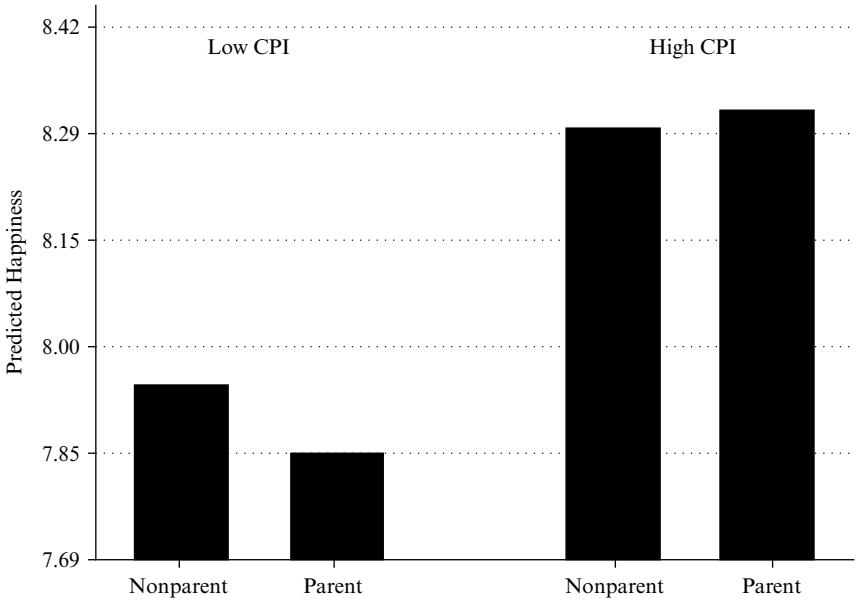
childcare) give parents time to decompress, complete errands and household tasks, care for loved ones, and spend time both with and away from children, all of these policies help reduce parents' stress and worry (Collins, 2019; Glass et al., 2016; Gornick and Meyers, 2003). Interestingly, Glass and colleagues (2016) find that child allowances (cash benefits paid directly to families) show little impact on parental wellbeing, perhaps because the average cash benefit in most countries remains fairly low given the costs of raising children.

On the other hand, flexible work scheduling positively influences subjective wellbeing measures like work-life conflict, work stress and fatigue (Golden et al., 2013). Paid parental leave is positively associated with parental happiness (Glass et al., 2016). Research also suggests that the availability and length of maternity leave is related to women's mental health: women who take short leaves and have poor-quality marriages are most vulnerable to depression (Hyde et al., 1995). These paid childbearing leaves influence parental happiness likely because they strengthen later parent-child attachment and minimize the long-term employment costs of parenthood (Glass et al., 2016; Misra et al., 2011).

Childcare quality is also important for mothers' mental health and wellbeing. Qualitative research suggests that the availability of high-quality, affordable childcare substantially increases working mothers' sense of work-life balance and satisfaction in Sweden and Germany, while the absence of reliable childcare in the United States and Italy is a monumental source of stress for mothers who work outside the home (Collins, 2019). Gordon and colleagues (2011) report that mothers who choose their children's daycare facility based on perceptions of quality report lower depressive symptoms than those who choose for practical reasons such as cost, hours and location.

Overall, these findings suggest that policy differences between countries may help shape the balance of costs and rewards for parenthood (Glass et al., 2016; Hansen, 2012; Margolis and Myrskylä, 2011, 2015). Parents living in countries with the most generous work-family policies and greatest gender equality seem to derive the greatest emotional benefits from having children (Hansen, 2012). In fact, the inverse relationship between parenthood and happiness is completely eliminated in nations with the strongest policy packages – those with paid parental leave, paid sick and vacation leave, and work schedule flexibility (Glass et al., 2016). Because fertility tends to be low in countries where the costs of parenthood are particularly high (Hilgeman and Butts, 2009), work-family policies may be a mechanism by which governments can increase fertility by removing the disincentives to parenting, equalizing the cost of childrearing, and easing the combination of employment and parenthood (McDonald, 1997). Further, given the well-established relationship between parental and child wellbeing (Cummings et al., 2005), it is likely that work-family policies improve not only the wellbeing of parents but also their children (Glass et al., 2016). Policies like parental leave influence the stress of caregiving and the stability of a couple's relationship, household division of labor and children's relations to their parents (Almqvist and Duvander, 2014). Even more significantly, welfare state policies seem to improve the levels of happiness for countries' general populations, both parents and nonparents alike (Flavin et al., 2014; Glass et al., 2016).

Glass and colleagues (2016) constructed a Comprehensive Policy Index (CPI) for 22 OECD countries that combines work flexibility, paid vacation/sick leave and paid leave available to mothers and tested whether the nations that score higher on this index have a smaller gap in parental happiness. They find that the countries that offer the strongest family policies (i.e., those that score highly on the CPI) exhibit a net positive effect of



Note: All control variables at the individual and country level are held at their sample mean.

Source: European Social Survey and International Social Survey Programme, 2004–07 from Glass et al. (2016).

Figure 25.2 Estimated happiness (1–10 scale) for parents and nonparents with the Comprehensive Policy Index (CPI)

parenthood on happiness, while those that offer the weakest policies (i.e., those that score lower on the CPI) show a deficit in parental happiness compared to nonparents.

The extent of gender-specific responses to work-family policies has not been settled, but some studies suggest this possibility. The legacy of 'breadwinner-housewife' gender ideologies can be seen in men's responses to the financial demands of parenthood even as couples rely more heavily on women's earnings to meet those demands (Pedulla and Thébaud, 2015). Employed women, by contrast, seem more affected by the time pressures and multitasking associated with parenting children, which disproportionately fall to mothers (Offer and Schneider, 2011). This suggests that men might be more affected by income supports for parenting, while women may respond more to time and scheduling interventions.

CONCLUSIONS

We conclude by discussing the avenues that future research should explore to improve our understanding of how public policies impact parental wellbeing. The heuristic model by Nelson and colleagues (2013) includes only emotional/psychological wellbeing as an outcome, but objective measures such as financial debt, disease burden and cortisol (stress hormone) levels could also productively be used to measure the micro-level impacts

of social policies. Future research should measure these objective aspects of wellbeing and uncover their role in producing both low second birth rates and low subjective wellbeing among parents. Better integration of health data with time-use studies across the European Union and English-speaking countries would also be helpful to see how policies change the daily patterning of activities and interactions in families of different household types. Scholars should especially focus on households disadvantaged by income, ethnicity or family structure (number of adults in the household) since these are the households most impacted by public policy or the lack thereof. We also need further research that investigates the role of partnership status (single, cohabiting, married), race and immigration status, age at parenthood and age of children, and social class on parents' response to social policies.

While policy makers seem to excessively focus on child wellbeing, the problem of low fertility ultimately stems from the effects of policies on *parents* because, although we want children to benefit from policies, policies affect the context in which adults make decisions about having children. We are missing the larger picture: why do parents decide (not) to have children, especially a second child after the first has arrived? Is the policy framework enough to still make parenthood desirable or is it just ameliorating the worst aspects of it? A research paradigm that focuses on the policy mix producing the highest level of Gross Domestic Happiness in families might ultimately resolve the problem of below replacement fertility faster than a focus on either cash transfers or fertility incentives. Currently, the costs of parenthood look so enormous in comparison to its mainly psychosocial benefits that many individuals simply opt out of reproduction. When the time and fiscal resource drain of raising children induces a free-rider problem in the reproduction of the next generation of workers and citizens, policy makers must attend to the fairness of the cost distribution among parents, employers and the state.

But this raises an important conundrum: that of how to increase policy support for parenting without harming those at other life stages. Some scholars (e.g., Ono and Lee, 2013) have suggested that social-democratic welfare states merely redistribute happiness among policy-targeted demographic groups in these countries. This suggests that the pro-family ideology of the social-democratic welfare states protects families from social risk and improves their wellbeing *at the cost of single persons*. However, Figure 25.2 suggests that the same policies that improve parental happiness also improve the happiness of nonparents, although to a lesser extent. Future research must determine the presence and extent of any redistribution of happiness between parents and nonparents, while simultaneously asking the thorny question of whether such redistribution is nevertheless in the best interests of children, families and the larger social good.

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