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Explaining Differences in Child Care Policy Development in France and the USA: Norms, Frames, Programmatic Ideas

LINDA A. WHITE

ABSTRACT. This article provides an answer to the question of why government support for child care policies and programs in the United States remains weak, despite increasing levels of women's labor market participation and a relatively strong women's movement, but strong in France, a country that has had lower levels of women's labor market participation as well as a much weaker women's movement. While those differences can be explained in part by economic and political interests and institutional and broad cultural differences, a theoretically richer understanding emerges when one examines how the three kinds of ideas underpinning these policy choices – norms, frames, and programmatic ideas – helped shape policies that emerged within specific actor, institutional, and cultural contexts.

Keywords: • Child care • Norms • Frames • France • United States

Introduction

How do we account for the fact that government support for child care policies and programs is underdeveloped in a country such as the United States with high levels of women's labor market participation and a relatively strong women's movement, but well developed[1] in a country such as France that has, since the early 1970s, experienced lower levels of women's labor market participation as well as a much weaker women's movement? This article finds that while the differences can be explained in part by economic and political interests and institutional and broad cultural differences, a theoretically richer understanding emerges when one examines the ideas underpinning these policy choices. I argue that the interaction of three kinds of ideas – norms, frames, and programmatic ideas – helped shape the policies that emerged within specific actor, institutional, and cultural contexts. Those institutionalized ideational legacies both constrained subsequent policy development and allowed new ideas to emerge within the normative framework already established.

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This article demonstrates that workable policy solutions to the need for women's labor emerged in France, not only as a result of actor mobilization, but also through actors coming up with the "right" idea, and using the "right" policy frames to persuade decision makers. Those right ideas and frames are those that appealed to extant worldviews.

The article proceeds as follows: the first section outlines the divergent policies. The second section reviews the limited usefulness of several theoretical approaches for explaining the differences and explains how ideational research offers tools that are more useful. The third summarizes shifting norms relevant to child care in the history of both countries, and the fourth applies the tools of ideational research to explain the process of normative institutionalization in both countries. A brief conclusion summarizes the argument.

The Differences between French and US Policies Today

France

While France's extensive child care and early childhood education (ECE) systems have been the focus of much recent scholarly attention (e.g. Bergmann, 1996; Cooper, 1999; Neuman and Peer, 2002), puzzling about the factors behind the development of such an extensive system is rarer.[2] France is widely touted as a child care policy leader because of its long tradition – beginning in the late 1700s – of providing early childhood education through pre-schools (*les écoles maternelles*) and child care (in *crèches* or *écoles maternelles*). French child care and family policies are highly regarded not only because they are generous, but also because they facilitate parents' full-time paid labor market participation (e.g. Joshi and Davies, 1992). Child care centers are usually open every working day for eleven hours and families bear only about one- quarter of the costs, the amount depending on their income and number of dependent children (OECD, 2004: 7, 20, 30). The hours they remain open are long enough to support parents' labor market participation (Cooper, 1999: 17). Attendance is strong: nearly 100 percent for three- to five-year-olds and about 35 percent for two-year-olds (OECD, 2004: 17). In addition, maternity and parental leave programs are generous: 16 weeks for a first child, with a replacement wage of 100 percent and at least 26 weeks for a second or third child) (OECD, 2004: 21), as well as a longer child rearing benefit (*l'allocation parentale d'éducation* or APE) that allows a parent of two or more children, the youngest being under the age of three, to leave work for up to two years, and receive a government allowance in exchange (Fagnani, 2002: 111).

The United States

The United States has developed an extensive child care market to deliver services on both a for-profit and a not-for-profit basis, often by workers with very low levels of education and at low wages, with low rates of unionization, and minimal state and federal regulations (Morgan, 2005). Parents, not the state, are largely responsible for the fees.

In the United States, governments have, over time, introduced some public child care programs; in fact, Haskins (2005: 141) notes that the federal government is currently involved in at least 70 or 80 major and minor programs related to child care. The vast majority of these programs are geared primarily toward children of low-income families, with a minority of programs, such as the Dependent Care

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Tax Credit, targeted to working families. It was not until passage of the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) in 1990, however, that the federal government committed significant funding to child care subsidies for lower-income families (OECD, 2000: 23–5). The 1980s and 1990s saw an expansion of federal funding on Head Start programs for disadvantaged children and their families,[3] as well as increased child care funding commitments for families fulfilling work requirements as part of the conditions for receipt of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).

Government funding is also shared between the federal and state governments, with the federal government funding Head Start, as well as providing a block grant program (the Child Care and Development Fund or CCDF) for states to operate their own child care programs. The federal government also allows families to claim child care tax credits on their income tax (Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit). Any child care or ECE initiatives outside of the major federal programs come from state coffers, and programs vary tremendously from state to state. Only in the past 10 years or so have state-based initiatives emerged to develop, largely part-day, pre-school programs (Barnett et al., 2006).

Furthermore, US federal law mandates only a 12-week period of job-protected unpaid leave (the Family and Medical Leave Act, 1993, or FMLA), and a number of restrictions on eligibility apply, leaving a large portion of the population with no government assistance upon the birth of a child (White, 2006). One result is, ironically, that a much greater percentage of very young children (aged 0–3) are cared for in a center-based program in the USA (20 percent) than in France (9 percent as of the late 1990s) (Neuman and Peer, 2002: 27–8).

In sum, child care is not regarded as an entitlement or a right of citizenship in the USA as it is in France (Helburn and Bergmann, 2002) and the level of public support and provision is much lower. Direct government funding for child care and early childhood development programs is still largely directed at poor families in the USA, while tax programs tend to benefit those who can afford to pay child care fees up front (OECD, 2000).

Accounting for Divergent Policy Development: Alternative Approaches

The comparative welfare state literature offers a number of approaches considered useful for explaining divergent policy development. This literature has tended to be largely dominated by rational and historical institutional accounts of policy development, such as (a) functionalist accounts that view policy development as a result of societal (e.g. Wilensky, 1975), economic (e.g. Hall and Soskice, 2001), or political (e.g. Weingast, 1995) needs that arise; (b) political culturalist arguments about broad national value differences (e.g. Inglehart, 1997); (c) actor-centered accounts such as power resources (e.g. Korpi, 1983; Huber and Stephens, 2001) that posit public policies which are the result of the relative strength of actors and groups in society; and (d) historical institutionalist accounts such as the regime literature (e.g. Esping-Andersen, 1990) that examines the constraining power of political institutions on future policy development (see also, e.g., Weir, 1992; Steinmo, 1995). None of these models fully accounts for policy development in the cases at hand. In addition, most are relatively static and have difficulty accounting for policy change (Thelen, 2003).

Functional explanations appear to provide at least part of the answer to account for the different policy choices observed in the two cases. In the early decades

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of the 20th century, French women were more likely to be in the paid labor force than US women.[4] French policymakers' much earlier response by way of child care, and related policies such as maternity leave, could thus simply reflect policymakers' views that women's labor market participation was necessary and should be encouraged (Jordan, 2006). However, governments can respond in different ways to similar policy problems. As Schneider (1990) points out, while both US and French policy makers feared "race suicide" in the early 20th century, each responded in different ways. While US governments imposed immigration restrictions and some eugenicist measures, such as sterilization, to prevent the "feeble minded" from reproducing, as well as measures designed to improve the lives and health of mainly white women and children, including discouraging white women's labor market participation (Michel, 1993; Ladd-Taylor, 1994; May, 1995),[5] French governments focused on increasing the birth rate of all French citizens, with little concern whether mothers were single or married (Jenson, 1986: 20). They accepted that mothers needed policies to help reconcile work and family life, such as nursing stations in factories, maternity leave, public schooling at an early age, and public child care (Jenson, 1986: 20; see also Cova, 1991, and Offen, 1991).

Functional arguments also cannot account for why the USA did not introduce child care and maternity leave policies in later decades. By the early 1970s, US women's labor market participation rates had risen significantly and began to surpass those in France (and in many other industrialized countries), but US governments did not respond with increased child care and maternity leave provisions.

Broad political cultural differences are also not fully explanatory. While successive French governments have had a continuing preoccupation with demography (e.g. Cole, 2000), other countries with similar pro-natalist histories and concerns, such as Germany, did not respond by implementing extensive child care and ECE policies in the early decades of the 20th century (Jordan, 2006). Since the 1970s, French policy has been less pro-natalist and more supportive of women's labor market participation, diminishing the persuasive power of demographic arguments during the post-1960 period (Fagnani, 2002).

The power of organized activism also proves unsatisfying in accounting for the differing policy histories. The US women's movement is much stronger, more formally organized, and more engaged in national politics than is the case in France (Duchen, 1986; Gelb, 1989; Rucht, 1996). Women in US labor unions were "among the most forceful and persistent proponents of child care programs" in the 1940s and 1950s and continued to press for both government and employer-based programs in the 1960s and beyond (Cobble, 2004: 133). Other organizations, such as the Children's Defense Fund, other children's groups, and labor unions and churches (Cohen, 2001; Cobble, 2004), have been actively pressing for child care for decades.

Both France and the USA have fairly strong religious and family-based conservative social movements (e.g. Gauthier, 1996; Michel, 1999). In France, while the early decades of the 20th century witnessed a great deal of socially conservative legislation – for example, around abortion – there was also a marked expansion of social policies to support the family (e.g. Jenson, 1986). In the USA, socially conservative groups have grown in strength politically since the 1980s (Diamond, 1995); yet child care programs have expanded at the same time under the rubric of welfare reform.

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The expansion in US child care funding has also occurred in a relatively decentralist and politically fragmented moment in US policy history. As Cohen (2001: 17–18) points out, some of the most significant changes in US child care policymaking were in fact enacted under divided governments: under a Republican President and Democratic Congress (the CCDBG under George H. W. Bush in 1990) and with a Democratic President and Republican Congress (TANF-related child care funding in 1996). Periods of unified Democratic government (Carter 1977–80 and Clinton 1993–94) saw little progress on child care (Cohen, 2001: 286–7). Similarly in France, the major expansion of child care services occurred in the post-1960s period, under mainly center-right governments (Morgan, 2003), with a major slowing of policies under the left-wing Mitterrand government (Jenson and Sineau, 1995).

Institutional factors can partially explain the differences observed in the two child care policy regimes. The institutionalization of French corporatist-style mediation among business, labor, and government was crucial in the development of the policies that emerged in the pre- and post-World War II periods. Family organizations, labor groups, and business associations in the early decades of the 20th century and later in the 1960s and 1970s realized it was in their interest to support a number of policies that allowed families to better reconcile work and family life in order to respond to labor market concerns.

What remains puzzling is how powerful oppositional actors began to see support for child care as in their interest. Why were French policy makers willing to support certain policies such as child care at the same time as they were endorsing other policies, such as barring night work for women, intended to discourage women's labor market participation (Fuchs, 1995)? Similarly, what is it about child care that has made it a controversial policy program, save for very poor women in the USA (Michel, 1999)?

The full explanation for the particular policy choices rests not only on observing the interests of and relationships between powerful governmental and non-governmental actors but also on the kinds of ideas present. Specific programmatic ideas, presented within specific frames that responded well to extant norms amongst those actors – in other words, the "right" ideas at the "right" time – influenced actors' policy choices and account for both the policy differences and policy changes observed over time in the two countries studied. Conversely, certain policy ideas were just not "on the table" because they did not fit with societal or governmental norms, even though they would more logically have fulfilled labor market needs.

A Different Approach: The Interactive Effects of Norms, Frames, and Programmatic Ideas

Ideational research offers a less familiar but potentially more useful approach. It has experienced a resurgence in recent years, often with very fluid and contradictory definitions. Schmidt (2008), for example, develops a typology of ideas based on what she describes as the "level of generality" of an idea (policies, programs, and philosophies) and type of content (cognitive and normative). These are more descriptive than analytic categories, however, and fail to consider the characteristics of the idea that lend it causal weight.

The institutionalist literature makes the most generous use of the ideational approach but is not unanimous as to its value. Rational choice institutionalists

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presume fixed actor preferences that are not really amenable to the transformative power of ideas, although ideas may act as "hooks" or "focal points" around which actors' interests converge (Goldstein and Keohane, 1993), and "institutions may evolve as a consequence of repeated interactions and learning effects" (Thelen, 2003: 215). Historical institutional theories pay even less attention to the role of ideas; they posit that self-reinforcing historical paths (e.g. critical junctures, lock-in effects, increasing returns, reactive sequences) mean policy trajectories which, once established, are difficult to change, even in the absence of the forces that gave rise to the original policies (Mahoney, 2000; Pierson, 2000a, 2000b).

Sociological institutionalists (e.g. March and Olsen, 1989), in contrast, see ideas as crucial. They argue that shared understandings of the "right" way to do things lead to certain norms (principles of right action) being institutionalized within broader cognitive and normative frameworks of understanding (what Hall [1993] calls "policy paradigms"). These shared understandings of "right action" create a logic of appropriateness. Actors remain agents within a "universe of political discourse" (Jenson, 1986), but they are limited not only by power relations that give importance to certain voices over others, but also by these shared belief systems.

The case of child care appears to speak to more sociological institutional explanations for policy development. Society and polity are clearly infused with powerful norms about the social position of men and women and self-understandings of who they are (such as, "am I a wife, am I a worker?") (e.g. Verloo, 2007). These norms comprise a set of rules and principles such that when decision makers act, they are guided by views and questions of appropriateness and not just consequences. For example, is it "appropriate" for women to work outside the home? Does child care detract from women's roles as mothers? Are children "harmed" by non-maternal care? Is it appropriate for governments to fund such programs? Actors' actions and their thinking can be shaped by those extant norms to the point where their own interests are viewed through these normative lenses.

Yet how does programmatic change occur when norms, by definition, are "fixed" – that is, institutionalized – and actors' preferences and power relations are relatively fixed as well? The institutional literature tends to turn to exogenous factors to explain policy change.[6] It has a difficult time accounting for more subtle policy changes that do not directly challenge core elements of a social policy regime or undermine norms, but are nevertheless reflective of regime change/evolution. Thelen's research calls for the study of endogenous processes of change such as institutional layering – the "grafting of new elements onto an otherwise stable institutional framework" – and conversion – the "adoption of new goals or the incorporation of new groups" (2004: 35–6).

Social constructivist literature on ideas and norms is more accommodative of change, claiming that "fitness" with dominant beliefs is a factor in the institutionalization of an idea as a norm (Florini, 1996). However, little research has been conducted on the ideational mechanisms through which norms become malleable and change. For this aspect, literature on framing offers helpful insights. Frames provide the crucial levers to introduce policy change, within extant norms, that can transform parts of norms but leave other parts intact. The central insight of the frames literature is that framing ideas "in the right way", through the use of linguistic and other cues, can alter people's perceptions of problems

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or issues and can influence their behavior (e.g. Kahneman and Tversky, 1981; Schneider and Ingram, 1993). Framing has the power to shift policies even while not fundamentally challenging the underlying logic of appropriateness; this can account for why policy changes can occur incrementally.

Drawing on these latter approaches, in this article I focus on the interaction among three kinds of ideas to account for policy change: norms, or shared beliefs about how actors "ought" to act (Finnemore, 1996); frames, or "persuasive devices used to 'fix meanings, organize experience, alert others that their interests and possibly their identities are at stake, and propose solutions to ongoing problems' " (Payne, 2001: 39); and programmatic ideas, or precise "intellectual blueprints" (Blyth, 2001) that "help actors to devise concrete solutions to their policy problems" (Campbell, 1998: 386).[7] I argue that ideational grafting, achieved by appropriate framing, can be one of the mechanisms that contribute to social policy regime evolution even while the core normative elements of a regime remain intact. The content of programmatic ideas matters as well: if programmatic ideas are appropriately framed to appeal to norms, they can persuade decision makers to act, and even to displace one policy with another.

While a number of researchers have claimed that different kinds of ideas carry causal weight,[8] the interactive effects of such ideas have not been fully explored. Blyth (2001: 2), for example, suggests three ways of conceiving of ideas to answer the question of how ideas spur on political action: ideas act as "blueprints during periods of uncertainty" – which suggests they carry causal weight as programmatic ideas; ideas act as "weapons in distributional struggles" – which suggests their causal weight as frames; and ideas act as "cognitive locks" – which suggests their causal weight as norms. But Blyth does not discuss what happens when these different kinds of ideas interact; rather, his categorization suggests that only one kind of idea matters at a particular time.

Yet these three kinds of ideas – programmatic ideas, norms, and frames – are inherently interconnected. All programmatic ideas rest on some normative justification and frames are in part deployed to take advantage of extant norms to make one's position seem not just reasonable but also appropriate. Thus, we can hypothesize that one of the key factors that lead to policy change is the extent that these three kinds of ideas fit with each other. Ideational interaction accounts for why certain elements of an institutional arrangement become negotiable, and why some ideas work better than others in encouraging institutional evolution (Lieberman, 2002; see also, Fischer and Forester, 1993; Hajer, 1993; Payne, 2001). Our next task is to examine how norms regarding child care actually changed over time in France and the United States, and then to apply the theory we have developed, and see how well it explains the differences between the two countries.

The Interactive Power of Norms, Frames, and Programmatic Ideas to Shape Actors' Actions in France and the United States

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, both French and US policy makers faced similar dilemmas: while labor market demands often made women's labor market participation necessary, policy makers and societal groups in both countries remained ambivalent about women's participation in work outside the home, not just because of typical gender norms that discouraged women's

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paid employment but also, in France, because of concerns about how women's paid employment would affect already-low birth rates and high rates of infant mortality (Gauthier, 1996), and in the USA, because a "maternalist" ideology had emerged that encouraged women to stay home to care for their children in order to ensure those children would grow up healthy (Michel, 1999). How did it happen, then, that successive French governments and a host of societal actors, including pro-natalists, doctors, and demographers, supported a number of policies that facilitated women's employment and the later development of child care programs, whereas US governments and powerful societal actors did not? The answer in both cases lies in the nature of the ideational interaction that took place

Building the "Right" Normative Foundations for Child Care: France

Organizations in France presented competing programmatic ideas to policy makers, drawing on different policy frames. While some organizations, such as familists, sought to protect the traditional family by encouraging government officials to relegate women to the home and confine them to a role of social reproduction, other actors and organizations, such as pro-natalists, doctors, and demographers, recognizing the labor market pressures, argued in support of social policies to encourage women employed outside the home to continue to have children (Pedersen, 1993; Jordan, 2006). They saw policies such as job-protected maternity leave, factory nursing stations, family allowances, and child care as ways to encourage women to be both workers and mothers (Offen, 1991). The policy frame of "reconciliation" ultimately won out amongst French policy makers over the frame of gender segregation.

From 1874 to 1936, however, French government policy held closely to the norms of gender segregation even when it provided improved conditions for working women. Thus *la loi Roussel* required that "every child under 2 left with a childminder [...] be 'under the surveillance of the public authorities to protect its life and health' " (Leprince, 1991: 23). In 1892, night work was banned for women and their hours were limited for certain forms of industrial labor (Fuchs, 1995) although at the same time programs were provided to help pregnant and nursing mothers at work.[9] Child care centers remained private but were increasingly regulated by and under the authority of government. In 1909, the first maternity legislation was passed (*la loi Engerand*; see Cova, 1991: 126), and in 1917, women working in industry were given one hour per day to nurse their babies, and employers with over 100 employees were required to establish nursing rooms in or near their factories and businesses (Cova, 1991: 132; see also, Downs, 1995). All of these policy developments had, of course, the effect of "normalizing" maternal employment, which then led to further labor-market-supportive policies. They were, however, based on a norm of gender difference, not gender sameness. During the interwar years a number of measures to help reconcile work and family life, including the establishment of a code of work regulations for the treatment of working women that included maternity leave provisions, and a private system of family allowance benefits which offered wage supplements to married workers (Pedersen, 1993), signaled the beginning of a more profound change.[10] It is true that during the Depression and World War II, the French government retreated from its earlier support of women's labor

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market participation to introduce policies such as a single-earner allowance to encourage married women to remain out of the paid labor market (*allocation de mère au foyer*, later named the *allocation de salaire unique*), and strict abortion and divorce laws. But nonetheless, by the time of the Matignon Accords, negotiated in 1936 between the government, employers, and trade unions to end a wave of strikes, a consensus seemed to have emerged that public policies should allow for "la conciliation entre la vie familiale et la vie professionelle" (reconciliation of work and family life). "Reconciliation" shifted from being a policy frame to appeal to extant norms regarding gender roles, and became the principle around which future policies developed. The parties agreed to acknowledge motherhood as "a social function, similar to the military service for men, that had to be financially supported by the whole community" (Bodard Silver, 1977: 276–7). At the war's end in 1946, the new French constitution articulated protection of the family as an important principle. The preamble of the constitution states that "The Nation shall provide the individual and the family with the conditions necessary to their development." At the same time it also endorsed "the duty to work and the right to employment" (Offen, 1991). Girard thus argues that "in spite of, at times, sharp differences over the role of working mothers, this basic idea [that the raising of the next generation was a social labor which required social support] was one which socialist trade unions, conservative Roman Catholics, feminists, and politicians across the spectrum could support" (1994: 606).

Failure to Build the "Right" Foundations for Child Care: the United States

In the US, a lesser need for women's labor market participation meant policy makers and other actors, such as trade unions and business leaders, strongly resisted policies to help reconcile work and family life. Instead, they accepted a two-fold approach: a strong male-breadwinner norm governing white middle- and upper-class households to discourage women in those households from working outside the home (Skocpol, 1992; Ladd-Taylor, 1994; Michel, 1999); and an expectation, if not imperative, because of the racialized nature of family support policies that were created pre-World War II, for poor, visible-minority, and immigrant women to work (Quadagno, 1994; Mink, 1995).[11]

Population and infant mortality concerns by the early 20th century were racialized in the USA in a way that they were not in France. While policy makers were willing to develop some "maternalist" programs, such as mothers' pensions and protective labor laws, policy makers feared that broad-based social programs to support social reproduction would encourage a high birth rate among the "unfit" members of US society. Many researchers have documented the eugenicist basis of arguments that "fit" women – that is, middle- and upper-class women of British and northern and western European stock – were not having enough babies; instead, eugenicists argued, too many babies were being born to poor minorities, the "feeble minded", and immigrant groups (May, 1995). State and federal governments were therefore encouraged to adopt policies to counteract this perceived population decline among the "fit", to stem immigration, and to discourage breeding of the "unfit", making governments ambivalent rather than enthusiastic about intervening to support poor, visible-minority, and immigrant families.

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Add to the mix the fact that Americans are culturally much more opposed to state intervention of any kind than are the French (Esping-Andersen, 1990), who have a strong tradition of statism, and who are much more reliant on voluntarism in social service provision (Skocpol, 1992; Michel, 1999), and one can see that the conditions were not ripe for a reconciliation norm, even though women's organizations in the USA promoted many of the same programmatic ideas as women's organizations in France, such as sex-based protective labor legislation, maternity leave provisions, maternal and child health programs, and child labor laws, to support women in their roles as mothers and to protect maternal and child health (Skocpol, 1992; Ladd-Taylor, 1994).

Instead, the primary means of government support that emerged around the early 20th century was mothers' pensions, not workplace-based programs. Maternalist reformers chose mothers' pensions – cash payments for fatherless families – as the best way to preserve traditional family structures, allowing mothers to care for children in the home and not to have to work at low-paid jobs (Skocpol, 1992; Michel, 1993). Labor unions were happy to support mothers' pensions along with protective labor laws, as these policies allowed them to argue for the right of men to earn a family wage, and decreased competition for jobs (Kenneally, 1985).

By the early 1930s, 44 states had established mothers' pensions, although these programs were often inadequately funded and did not provide coverage to all in need (Skocpol, 1992; Goodwin, 1997; Mittelstadt, 2005). The Social Security Act of 1935 incorporated these state programs into Aid to Dependent Children (ADC). That program, which later became Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), remained the core program of the US welfare state for most of the 20th century, although again with many of the limitations of the early state pension programs (Skocpol 1992; Ladd-Taylor 1994). Eligibility rules loosened gradually to allow divorced, never-married and non-white mothers to collect benefits in ever larger numbers in the 1940s and 1950s (Mittelstadt, 2005: 3). However, children of unmarried women and women of color were often still excluded under "suitable home," "man in the house," and "substitute father" rules until the 1960s (Mink, 1998).

Thus, women from poor, visible-minority, and immigrant families had to work, owing to the absence of public policies to support their roles as mothers, whereas women from white families were strongly discouraged from participating in the labor market through the absence of significant reconciliation policies, such as child care and paid maternity leave. This anti-employment norm carried through the Depression and the post-World War II years, even as pre-school programs operating for a few hours a day grew increasingly popular among the middle class (Michel, 1999).

Post-War Policy Possibilities within Extant Norms: Using the "Right" Policy Frames

Decision makers in both countries thus comprised a coalition of similar groups in the early decades of the 20th century, but they differed fundamentally on the issue of whether women – that is, white, native-born women – should be encouraged to participate in the paid labor market. Normative and policy institutionalization in the early 20th century in both countries established the framework within which new policies emerged in the post-World War II period, with "reconciliation" serving

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as the norm, a term more suited to the goal of building a publicly funded child care system then "maternalism."

France: The Institutionalization of Child Care as Part of Reconciliation

By the 1960s, women's groups especially began to pressure the French government to reframe its family policies to reflect gender equality principles. As part of those efforts, women's groups began to call for more comprehensive child care services to support women's increased participation in the paid labor market. Jenson and Sineau (1995) argue that these programmatic ideas received the support of many of the "modernizers" of the Fourth Republic who also supported the idea of women working.

After the 1969 election of President Georges Pompidou, reformers in the Commissariat Générale du Plan (General Planning Commission) "sought to make family benefits one element of an 'active family policy'," which included professional training for women, and increased child care and pre-school instruction (Lenoir, 1991: 170). The Pompidou government promised, as part of the sixth plan (1970–5), to create 13,300 new places for children, mostly by opening new child care centers. Also in 1970, the government introduced subsidies for child care centers to help with operating expenses. Legislation in 1971 and 1974 allowed for the appropriation of 100 million francs to encourage developers to build facilities (David and Starzac, 1991: 98–9).

The government's willingness to support child care services, however, rested in part on the fact that France experienced another decline in the birth rate in the 1960s after an increase following World War II. The government thus wanted to encourage women to have more children, while recognizing that it had to take account of the fact that women were increasingly unwilling to give up their positions in the workforce. Child care framed as supportive of mothers' efforts to reconcile work and family life thus remained particularly resonant.

Morgan (2003: 270) argues that it was secularization that allowed for significant child care policy development by the 1970s because it "opened the door to pragmatic policy decisions, whereby state goals of economic growth and modernization took precedence over concern for preserving the traditional male-breadwinner family." Lanquetin, Laufer, and Letablier (2000) note, as well, pressure from supranational organizations such as the European Community (EC) to get rid of "protective" labor legislation such as the banning of night work for women. Yet even by the end of the 1970s, there is evidence that the principle of gender difference had not given way to gender sameness. Legislation still remained regarding the length of working time, work organization, and retirement age that reflected the position that women should be protected in their role as mothers (Lanquetin et al., 2000: 83). Governments continued to implement policies such as long periods of parental leave, under the pretense of helping families to reconcile work and family life. For example, the d'Estaing government created the *congé parental d'éducation* (CPE) (parental leave) in 1979, providing unpaid leave for two years after the birth of a child for workers with some seniority in firms of over 200 employees. In 1985, the Mitterrand government also established subsidies to encourage parents to leave the labor market for longer periods to provide their own care for children, such as the *allocation parentale d'éducation* (APE), or child rearing allowance, described further below.

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In recent years, in addition to the support given to center-based forms of child care, the French government has also introduced more individualized financing programs, including allowances to parents who choose to hire certified mothers' helpers who work out of their own homes, as well as allowances for hiring a helper in one's own home. Any explanation for the extensiveness of these programs thus should be able to account for the historically strong governmental support for "core" institutional forms of child care such as pre-schools, as well as the introduction or the "layering" (Thelen, 2004) of more "individualized" forms of care (Fagnani, 2003).

The USA: Child Care and the Shift from Maternalism to Liberalism

Advocacy groups agitating for child care in the USA in the 1960s and 1970s faced much more hostile opposition to child care. A purely interest-based account of child care policy failure points to the role of powerful opposition from actors such as business groups, anti-communists, and the increasingly influential religious right as well as market-based child care service providers. Researchers suggest that organized resistance, combined with an institutional, fragmented state structure, made policy reform impossible (Cohen, 2001). Such an explanation, however, downplays the importance of the specific content of that ideational resistance, particularly as related to gender and employment norms.

By the latter decades of the 20th century, child care became an increasingly pragmatic programmatic idea in response to the increased need for women's labor. At the political level, the group of women in positions of leadership who traditionally supported maternalist policies gave way to more liberal feminists (Cobble, 2004), although the latter remained ambivalent as to whether to endorse policies that would in any way imply that mothers were solely responsible for the care of children (Joffe, 1983). Also by the 1950s, the federal government had become increasingly concerned about rising welfare rolls as a result of the loosening of AFDC eligibility rules to include single mothers and women of color (Mink, 1998; Mittelstadt, 2005). While, in actual numbers, white female-headed households outnumbered black female-headed households receiving AFDC benefits, by the 1970s, black families made up a larger percentage of recipients (Quadagno, 1994: 135). This "blackening" of the welfare rolls spurred attacks from some policy makers and led to a decline in the program's popularity among white Americans (Michel, 1999, ch. 7). The federal government thus began to seek ways to encourage AFDC recipients into the labor market.

By the early 1960s, changes to federal welfare laws signaled increasing support of the view that poor women should work outside the home (Michel, 1999: 243–5; Mittelstadt, 2005, ch. 4). That view was reinforced when Congress established the Work Incentive Program (WIN) in 1967 that explicitly required AFDC recipients to participate in work programs or train for employment. States could require mothers with pre-school age children to participate in job training or employment if child care that met federal standards was available (laws passed in 1971 made such participation mandatory, although exempting single women with children under the age of six) (Mittelstadt, 2005: 168). Then, in 1969, President Richard Nixon proposed the Family Assistance Plan (FAP), whose goal was to fund child care services so that mothers on AFDC could participate in the labor market (Steinfels, 1973: 189; see also, Kornbluh, 2007, ch. 6).

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By the 1970s, then, maternal care-giving norms in the US were giving way to the idea of child care as a rational adjunct to assist poor women's labor market participation. In 1971, Congress passed the Comprehensive Child Development Act, a child care bill in which the main emphasis was not on support for working mothers, narrowly cast to include only poor mothers, but rather on child development and education for all children. However, powerful actors still resisted the idea that all women should participate in the labor market or that governments should fund labor-market-supportive policies, and this normative resistance goes a long way to account for Nixon's veto of the bill (Cohen, 2001). In 1969, President Nixon had publicly stated that he was supportive of " 'providing all American children an opportunity for healthful and stimulating development during the first five years of life' " (quoted in Cohen, 2001: 44). During Congressional hearings on the bill, however, conservative religious groups had argued quite vehemently that child care undermined the traditional family and should not be publicly supported. Some in Congress even argued that child care was a communist plot, designed to sovietize America (Steinfels, 1973: 191), and Nixon turned against the legislation, stating famously, "For the Federal Government to plunge headlong financially into supporting child development would commit the vast moral authority of the National Government on the side of communal approaches to child-rearing over against the family-centered approach" (as quoted in Steinfels, 1973: 19; Cohen, 2001: 51). Thus, fears of "communistic" child development policies defeated the legislation. If the child care legislation had been narrowly framed as a support for poor women's labor market participation, it might have had a greater chance of succeeding, as other bills had earlier.

By the 1980s, the norm of government support for poor women's labor market participation had solidified. The Family Support Act signed into law in 1988 required that single parents on welfare with children over three years old participate in the JOBS program. States had to guarantee child care for parents with children under the age of six, although lack of funding made implementation of such child care services difficult.

Passage of the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) in 1990 might therefore seem like a significant departure from past policy practice, as it was the first non-welfare-related child care program the federal government enacted. However, it is important to note the anti-poverty focus of the Act: the Act provided federal transfers of funds to states to provide child care support for families earning less than 75 percent of the state median income. The parents had to be working or in job training or another education program, and the child had to be aged under 13 (Cohen, 2001: 129). Also passed under the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1990 was the At-Risk Child Care Program, which provided child care subsidies for families at risk of becoming welfare-dependent. The frame underpinning this legislation was that of supporting poor mothers' labor market participation (even though the policy does not in any way provide adequate coverage for the working poor in the USA).

The Limits and Possibilities of Normative Institutionalization

More recent events in France reveal the limits that the principle of reconciliation can impose on the expansion of child care policies and programs.[12] When the French government began to face strong fiscal pressures and budgetary shortfalls

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in the 1980s and 1990s, collective forms of child care were an easy target. By the 1980s, after experiencing some decades of labor shortages, France faced very high levels of unemployment, as well as a financial crisis that began in the 1970s. After an initial commitment to expand collective forms of child care, the government under President Mitterrand began to develop more flexible forms of child care, such as a subsidy for parents employing a nanny at home, in 1986, and funds for families to employ a registered childminder, in 1991. Ironically, as Fagnani (2003: 5) points out, it is often cheaper for a family to use a child care center than it is to employ a registered childminder, and it is only possible for higher-income families to employ a nanny at home, yet governments chose to introduce these care policies again on the principle that it would help families reconcile work and family lives. Fagnani (2003: 5) argues that the shortage of places in child care centers in fact often drives lower-paid women workers to leave the paid labor market after the birth of a child.

In addition to these "push" factors, in 1985 the government instituted a significant "pull" factor that has led a large number of women to exit the labor market. It established a paid child rearing allowance that allowed a parent of three or more children, the youngest being under the age of three, to leave work for up to two years, and receive a government allowance in exchange. Then, in 1994, the government made it possible for parents to be eligible for such a subsidy after the second child, rather than the third, although the government imposed stricter conditions for receipt of this benefit. Many argue that this policy, as well as encouraging families to have children, is a more blatant attempt to have (primarily) women reduce the number of hours they work, or leave the labor force altogether, in order to combat high unemployment. Fagnani (2003: 9–10) notes that the number of recipients, the vast majority of whom are women, climbed from 154,000 in 1993 to 541,000 in 2000, and the labor market participation rate of women with two children (with the youngest under the age of three) declined from 69 percent in 1994 to 53 percent in 1998. The debate over paid parenting leave thus illustrates the fragile balancing of principles of gender equality and gendered "reconciliation." While the norm of reconciliation supports women's employment, this same norm can subvert that support in the name of upholding the family.

By the late 1990s in the United States, political, social, and economic factors further entrenched child care as an anti-poverty policy; but that entrenchment has opened up new policy avenues. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996 (Public Law 104–193) went the furthest of all federal legislation in solidifying child care as an anti-poverty policy. The Act removed any child care cash entitlements and instead gave two block grants to states: one, the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) grant, to help states pay for welfare programs; and the other to help states subsidize child care costs for families who are on welfare, leaving welfare, or at risk of being on welfare. The Act represents a significant and some would say a punitive change in the delivery of social assistance in the US (see, for example, Mink, 1998). Yet in order to get passage of the Act, Democrats were able to persuade Republican lawmakers to accept that if poor women are to work, they need child care. That connection of child care to welfare reform was a pivotal victory for Democratic lawmakers, as Republican leaders originally intended to "gut" child care funding altogether (Cohen, 2001: 180, quoting Senator Christopher Dodd).

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By the late 1990s, then, most policy makers and the broader policy community accepted the idea that the government should help poor women achieve the "dignity of work."[13] The use of child care to help poor (and mainly single) women get off and stay off welfare became, as one Senate staffer described it in 2004, a "negotiated consensus" requiring federal and state governments to offer some programmatic support for child care for poor families – although continuous under-funding and variation in benefits at the state level belie the adequacy of that programmatic support (or, indeed, the quality of the child care to which children are exposed).

Since that "negotiated consensus," policy developments are occurring mainly at the state level through a reframing of child care as "pre-school" or "early childhood education" (Barnett and Yarosz, 2007; White, 2004b). Government support for these pre-school programs is often targeted, however, not universal. Of the 38 states that have introduced some kind of publicly funded pre-kindergarten programs, only two states – Georgia and Oklahoma – have programs that enroll a majority of children aged four (Barnett et al., 2006). Of the 48 state initiatives currently in place, many allow delivery other than by public schools (Barnett et al., 2006: 196–7). Early childhood education in the USA thus appears to be developing much like child care has: as an anti-poverty program delivered through a variety of service providers.

Conclusion

The case of child care policy development thus provides an excellent demonstration of the interactive effects of norms, frames, and programmatic ideas. In France, in the early decades of the twentieth century, a consensus formed around the need for policies to reconcile work and family life. The reconciliation norm proved an acceptable principle around which actors could agree because it tied in well with demographic concerns to increase the birth rate and did not disrupt traditional gender roles regarding motherhood. The institutionalization of the principle of reconciliation in public policy allowed policies supportive of maternal employment, such as child care, to emerge but did not undermine women's care-giving in the home. Policies developed within that norm were perceived as politically, economically, administratively, and socially viable (Hall, 1989).

In the USA, in contrast, advocates have continuously supported child care as a means to allow all women to participate in the labor market equally with men, contribute to child development, and support poor women's labor market participation. Only the latter frame has succeeded. Neither of the other frames advocates have used – emphasizing child care as important to gender equality, or child care as "good for children" – resonate well with extant norms in the USA of non-state intervention in parental authority, and male-breadwinner norms.

This article accounts for evolutionary policy change within the two countries within relatively stable norms. It posits ideas as drivers of policy evolution and argues that while the overall values and beliefs of actors may not change, new programmatic ideas, framed in the "right" way, can help reconcile contested policies with extant norms. However, it also points to the limits on policy change. In France, reconciliation allowed for the development of maternal-employment-supportive policies such as child care, but ultimately limited the possibility of more radical policy change designed to deepen gender equality. Once entrenched as a norm, "reconciliation" left little room for gender-transformative policies

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to emerge that would fundamentally challenge gendered assumptions about women's responsibility for care, and it could undermine support for maternal employment during periods of high unemployment. In contrast, in the USA, government funding for both child care and ECE rests mainly under the rubric of anti-poverty.

The article thus demonstrates that disentangling the specific weight of norms, frames, and programmatic ideas helps us to better understand their combined influence and interaction. Future research on the role of ideas thus needs to clearly specify not only that ideas matter, but also what kinds of ideas matter in the particular area under study, and in what combination.

Notes

1. On a number of cross-national benchmarks. See, for example, UNICEF (2008).
2. Although see e.g. Morgan (2003; 2006) and White (2002 and 2004a).
3. Although Head Start programs are not designed to support parental labor market participation; indeed, parents are expected to participate in Head Start programs along with their children.
4. Durand (1948, p. 209) reports that as of 1900 in the USA, women's labor force participation rates were at 20 per cent (as a percent age of female population ages 14-64 years). Mitchell (2003a, p. 149) reports that women's labor force activity as a percentage of total female population in France was 36 percent (1901 figures). In 1950 Mitchell (2003a, p. 149; 2003b, p. 107) reports women's labor force activity at 38 percent of the total female population in France and 30 percent in the USA. By 1970, however, women's labor force participation rates in the two countries were virtually the same and by 2000, women's labor force participation rates were much higher in the USA (71 percent) than in France (62 percent) (OECD, 2008).
5. Concomitantly, program access and eligibility restrictions meant many visible minority and immigrant women had no choice but to work (e.g. Mink, 1995).
6. Punctuated equilibrium models (e.g. Baumgartner and Jones, 1993) suggest those changes occur as a result of "dissatisfaction with or a recognition of the inadequacy of existing belief structures or behavioral patterns" that tend to result either from exogenous shocks that force "a rapid reconsideration of traditional ideational frameworks or from the gradual yet increasing disillusionment and the slow delegitimization of existing beliefs" (Berman, 2001, p. 234). Scholars refer to these as "third order change" (Hall, 1993) or "great transformations" (Blyth, 2002). But, as Schmidt (2008, p. 316) points out, historical institutionalists often have a difficult time explaining why such critical moments occur.
7. I distinguish these three kinds of ideas from broad amalgamations of ideas such as ideologies, which are coherent sets of shared beliefs, values and principles, typically expressed by political groupings, about social, political, and economic relations (Gerring, 1997; see also Oliver and Johnston, 2000); paradigms, which are constellations "of beliefs, values, techniques and so on shared by members of a given community," and akin to scientific ideologies in that they "denote a concrete puzzle-solution" (Dogan, 2001, p. 11023); and cultures which refer to "modes of understanding and values prevalent in societies or subsocieties or both" (Eckstein, 1988, p. 802) that contain "a multitude of often contradictory strands and traditions" (Morgan, 2006, p. 18). Like Ferree and Merrill (2000) I distinguish frames from discourses which are "broad systems of communication that link concepts together in a web of relationships through an underlying logic" (Ferree and Merrill, 2000, p. 455). While Schmidt (2008) and others label these frames, they really are amalgamations of frames connected together with a coherent underlying logic. The framing process connotes the process by which "discourses, ideologies, and frames are all connected" (Ferree and Merrill, 2000, p. 456).

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8. For a good review of the literature on ideas and public policy see Campbell (2002).
9. In addition, efforts to reduce infant mortality and to educate women on how to care for their children also prompted the French government by the mid-1800s to recognize what were then private child care centers as "establishments of public utility" (La Berge, 1991).
10. As Jordan (2006, pp. 1126–27) points out, those "allowances were also designed to promote female entrance into the labor market by granting maximum benefits to those families where both husband and wife worked for member companies."
11. At the turn of the 20th century, only 17 percent of white women in the USA partici-pated in the paid labor force, compared with 41 percent of non-white women (Peterson 1964, p. 684).
12. Stratigaki (2004) makes a similar argument about the limits of "reconciliation" in its application in the EU.
13. Although see Mink (1998) for arguments in favor of continuing maternalist policies.

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