



Europe: different traditions, same problems

Family policy has to be intersectional

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Interview with Rudolf Richter, Professor of Sociology at the University of Vienna (Austria) and engaged in the Seventh Framework Project of the European Union FamiliesAndSocieties [1] where he is co-leader of Work package 3: The new roles of men and women and implications for families and societies.

Rudolf Richter specializes in Family Sociology, Family Policy, Generational relations as well as sociological theory and perspectives. He served as President member of the Austrian Institute for Family Studies from 1999 to 2002. He chaired and was member of the European Observatory on the Social Situation, Demography and the Family between 2000 and 2004. He then served as President of the RCo6-Family Research Committee of the International Sociological Association from 2006 to 2014 and as Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Vienna from 2004 to 2014.

1. How would you describe your main tasks and responsibilities within the project FamiliesAnd-Societies?

For me, there are two tasks: work package co-leader and leader of the project at the University of Vienna.

As Work package leader, Irena Kotowska from Warsaw School of Economics and I coordinate 12 partners. The general objective of this work package is to address the complex interplay between the new roles of women and men and the diversity of family life courses in contemporary Europe.

We look at the implications for family dynamics, study the gendered transition to parenthood as well as coping strategies in family and work reconciliation under conditions of uncertainty and precariousness. Our main challenge will be when presenting an integrating report with looking at the consequences of our results for family policy. This will be done in 2017.

In our project in Vienna we study the transition to parenthood in following couples from pregnancy to half year after giving birth, thus elaborating which elements impact the building of new gender roles gradually in this process (it is a qualitative longitudinal study).

2. You recently launched a blog on European Families [2], what is the reason behind it and what is it about?

On this blog, I give insights in results and perspectives of family sociology. Readers will gain knowledge how sociologists look at the family, and as a result understand different qualitative and quantitative approaches, they will know the central issues and basic results on contemporary family, and, last but not least, I will report on results from our studies in the FamiliesAndSocieties project. In not only informing about results but also giving thoughts on what they mean. I want to encourage the reader to reflect the issues raised and build his or her own opinion. It is meant for practitioners in the field of family issues as well as people interested in the subject of family and maybe people who want to study family sociology.

3. You reported, for instance, a study of the FamiliesAndSocieties project about short-term childbearing intentions in ten European States. According to you, how perceived job and income insecurity might impact couples in their decision to have (or not) a child?

Susanne Fahlen and Livia Olah from Stockholm University used data from the European Social survey to answer the question if and how a perceived economic situation has an impact to child-bearing intentions. For me, the important result was not so much that the perceived economic situation has an impact, but that it has in different countries different impact on different age groups and different family situation. This allows identifying groups, which especially have the feeling of uncertainty in different countries. To give one from the numerous results from this study: in the UK there are childless women between 24 and 35, who feel hindered by the economic situation whereas in the Netherlands it is childless men between 30 and 35. Of course, also country specific welfare measures, like parental leave for young children or available child care facilities, matter additionally.

The important issues are, that income insecurity matters, but not everywhere at the same stage in the life course. European countries show a variety, which does not allow a strategy of "one –size-fits-all".

4. What do you think about the difficulties families are facing today in balancing work and family responsibilities?

The possibility of balancing work and family life depends on measures of family policy, available private family networks and societal norms. We see that family policy measures have a different impact in Europe. Childcare facilities for children below the age of three will in every nation contribute to a balanced life. Additionally family networks, especially grandparents in a reachable distance, which is up to a maximum of 30 minutes in reach, broaden the possibilities of parents to combine work and family life. From our qualitative studies in Switzerland, Sweden and Austria we found our interviewees referring to societal norms. The meaning that mother should stay at home for the first year makes it difficult for men to participate in a way they want. Fathers see the traditional images of men as strong and breadwinner as a hindrance to living a more gender-equal life.

5. What policies are really working in your opinion in this respect?

The policies usually provide a mix of cash benefits, tax reductions and provision of child care facilities, but differently allotted in different countries. Family Policy also has to make clear, what should be reached: Rising fertility rate? Gender equality? Full-time employment for men and women? Fighting child poverty? Well-being of children? Those are all policy intentions, but they could not be reached with one measure. Very generally, we can say that adequate child care facilities, especially for children below three, combined with flexible working hours and models for father's leave work best for families. But again we see that the impact is neither very big nor does a measure have the same impact in each country.

6. What would be the best political answers to be encouraged to face this challenge?

In my opinion, today's family policy has to be intersectional, looking across the field of family. As economic issues are always raised in the interviews as a driving source of well-being, family politicians must reach out for the ministers of

economy to enable equal income opportunities for men and women and fight the gender pay gap. Secondly, family policy has to be aware of different lifestyles and treat them equally. In most of the European Nations it would mean to treat cohabitation equally to marriage, same-sex couples equal to heterosexual couples and improve significantly the economic situation of single parents.

The strategies of family policy in Europe reach back to the implementation of social policy in the second half of the nineteenth century. The measures the welfare states implemented reflect mainly the situation of the sixties of the twentieth century. Since then life course has changed dramatically. Not only have new living forms emerged, most consequential is longevity. This raises the question why everything has to happen in the rush-hour of life in the early thirties: making a career, building a home, raising a family – and everything simultaneously for both sexes. Models who ease the overburden in this life phase should be elaborated and implemented. One measure is, for instance, to count the months staying at home with children to retirement age and income, as done in some countries.

7. About the recently concluded negotiations at United Nations on the new Development Agenda that have led to the adoption of the new goals, how would you define the goal of families in development?

As families have an integrative and emotionally stabilizing function in each society, not forgetting their contribution to raising children and looking after the elderly, societies usually help families. They do it in a different way and UN decisions have always to consider the global varieties, in the frame of respecting the human rights.

This is mind, I would formulate following primary goals:

- Allow in each country to live the family forms the people want to live and provide necessary infrastructure in care facilities.
- Ensure a stable and sufficient income for families.
- Ensure the possibility for families to be embedded in communal private social networks.
- Ensure equality as part of the well-being of parents and children.

8. And what would be the main implications for European countries?

European countries have different traditions in the way they solve their problems, but they have similar problems to solve: equality and well-being of families, with the focus not only on parent but also on children. Fighting the gender pay gap and looking for appropriate income opportunities I would rank first. Labor legislation is another core issue of concern. The structure of parental leave, leave opportunities for fathers, flexible working hours, flexibility across the life course, and enabling working from home are amongst the most important topics that should be dealt with. But again: There is no one-size-fits-all for the European countries.

[1] www.familiesandsocieties.eu.

[2] www.europeanfamilies.co.