

# Culture and Welfare State Policies: Reflections on a Complex Interrelation

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## **Abstract**

In comparative welfare state analyses, cross-national differences have often been explained both by the specific profiles of welfare state institutions and the constellations of social actors. However, the way in which cultural differences also contribute to the explanation is often ignored, or at least treated as a more marginal issue. The aim of this article is to reflect on the relationship between culture and welfare state policies, and consider how it might be analysed in a comparative perspective. A theoretical framework for analysis is introduced in which the relationship of culture and welfare state policies is conceptualised as a complex, multi-level relationship which is embedded in the specific context of a particular society and can develop in contradictory ways.

## **Introduction**

Cross-national empirical research on welfare state policies was a prospering field of research in the last decade. In theoretical debates on comparative welfare state analyses, cross-national differences have often been explained by the specific profiles of welfare state institutions and the specific constellations of social actors (see, for example, Esping-Andersen, 1990, 1999; Manow, 2002; Rhodes, 2001;). However, the ways in which cultural differences also contribute to the explanation is often ignored, or at least treated as a more marginal issue (see also Baldock, 1999; van Oorschot and Halman, 2000).

Some approaches, either explicitly or implicitly, include culture; for instance Esping-Andersen's 'welfare regime' approach (1990, 1999). He argues that differences between welfare regimes are based on differences in the 'basic principles' on which welfare state policies are founded: for example, differing ideas in relation to solidarity, equality and the role of the welfare state versus the market. These principles can also be interpreted as fundamental 'values' of welfare state action. Feminist social policy research has, in addition, established that it is possible to distinguish between various types of welfare state, depending on what gender relations model they apply (Lewis, 1992; Lewis and Ostner, 1994; Mósesdóttir, 2000). Some authors have also analysed the role played by Christianity and

Christian democratic parties in the development of European welfare states (Daly, 1999; Kaufmann, 1989, van Kersbergen, 1995; Opielka, 2002) or the impact of Confucian religion on the development of social policies in South East Asia (Rieger and Leibfried, 1999). Recently, a rich collection of articles was published by a group of British researchers who stress the interplay of culture and welfare state in a cross-national perspective (Chamberlayne *et al.*, 1999).

However, until now there have been few efforts to place the interrelations of welfare state policies and culture systematically in a theoretical framework for comparative welfare state analysis (see also Bang *et al.*, 2000; Opielka, 2002). The aim of this article is to reflect on the relationship between culture and welfare state policies and consider how it might be analysed in a comparative perspective. In the first section, I introduce a theoretical framework for analysis: the 'welfare arrangement' approach. The main elements, as well as the main levels of the welfare culture, will be outlined. Also, the relationship of ideas and interests of social actors in relation to the welfare state will be analysed, as well as the heterogeneity of welfare arrangements. The next section includes reflections on the way culture can modify the impact of welfare state policies on social practices of individuals, and a further section reflects on change and path dependency of welfare culture and welfare arrangements.

'Culture' is defined here as the 'system of collective constructions of meaning by which human beings define reality' (Neidhard *et al.*, 1986: 11). It includes stocks of knowledge, values and ideals; in sum: ideas. In the debates on the interrelations of welfare state policies and culture, it is common today to talk about 'welfare culture'. The term is used in two different ways, in a broader or a more narrow sense (Dallinger, 2001; Ullrich, 2000). In the first more comprehensive type of approach, it refers to the whole complex of values, institutional traditions and institutional practices of welfare states. In a more limited sense, it means the complex of ideas to which welfare state policies refer (Hinrichs, 1997; Kaufmann, 1991; Offe, 1987, 1990). I refer here to a notion of 'welfare culture' according to the second type of approach. 'Welfare culture' in this sense means the relevant ideas in a given society surrounding the welfare state and the way it is embedded in society. It comprises the stock of knowledge, values and ideals to which the relevant social actors, the institutions of the welfare state and concrete policy measures refer. These can be ordered or logically inconsistent. The cultural values and ideals which predominate in the welfare culture restrict the spectrum of possible policies of a welfare state.

### **The welfare arrangement approach**

I suggest analysing the relationship of welfare state policies and culture by using the theoretical approach of 'welfare arrangements'. According to this approach, welfare state policies are embedded in the societal context of the welfare culture

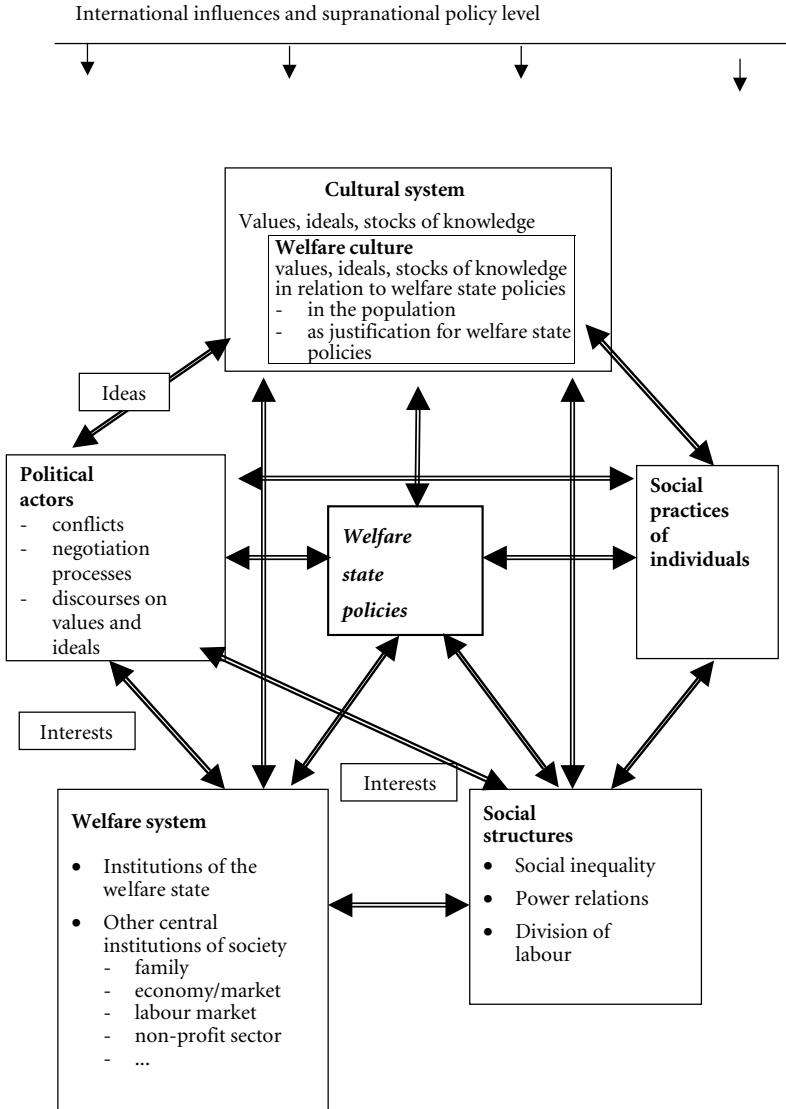


Figure 1. Interrelations within the welfare arrangement.

(the relevant values and ideas in a given society surrounding the welfare state), the institutional system which comprises institutions of the welfare state and other central institutions, social structures and social actors, and their interrelations (see Figure 1).

This approach is designed to take account of the complex interrelations of culture and welfare state policy in the societal context. The approach here is based

on the assumption that culture does not simply exert a determining influence on politics, or vice versa. Instead, their mutual impact is influenced and modified by the interaction of institutional and social factors in the respective 'societal context'. It is assumed that:

- the elements of the welfare culture refer to the different policy areas of welfare states, with which these refer to the structures of social inequality and of the division of labour in society, and to the central institutions of society like the labour market, the market, the non-profit sector and the family (see also Figure 1);
- welfare culture and welfare state policies are connected via the ideas of social actors;
- welfare state policies are the result of conflicts, negotiating processes and compromises of social actors in relation to their ideas and interests; and
- culture can also modify the impact of welfare state policies on the behaviour of individuals and social groups.

The term 'arrangement' refers to the specific form of interrelations of the differing levels in a particular context of time and space, which is the result of conflicts, negotiating processes and compromises of social actors. Welfare culture is seen as a central basis of the welfare arrangement. It can have the role of an integrating factor of welfare state policies and institutions and therefore be an important basis for the coherence of the welfare arrangement.

### **Heterogeneity of welfare arrangements and welfare cultures**

The degree to which the cultural basis of a welfare arrangement forms a coherent unit and is integrated may vary in the context of time and space. In contrast to social structures and institutions, culture is often regarded as a coherent entity, as a harmonious unit providing for the integration of society. Sociology adopted this 'myth of cultural integration' (Archer, 1996: xvii) together with the theoretical understanding of 'culture' from early anthropology (Wimmer, 1996). One has to take into account the fact that inside the cultural system divergent or even contradictory values and ideals may exist. For example, Kluegel (1989) found that in the United States affirmative and critical views towards equity co-existed in the population. He called this 'split consciousness'. Consequently he introduced a distinction between dominant value orientation and challenging belief. The findings of Wegner (1992) in his comparative study on Germany and the United States supported this idea. He found that in addition to the predominant general attitude in the German population towards the intervening welfare state, there was also a second, challenging attitude popular within the service class based on the specific interests of this class, and giving priority to the free market in guaranteeing equity.

I thus propose broadening the theoretical framework for the international comparative study of welfare state policy, on the premise that welfare state policy has a special mutual relationship with the cultural dimension, with key institutions of society, with structural dimensions, and with the actions of social actors in the given 'welfare arrangement'. The differences between the main cultural ideas to which the given welfare state policy ultimately refers in differing policy fields are important for explaining why these policies vary on an international scale. The fundamental values and models should also be considered in approaches to the classification of welfare states.

With numerous analyses comparative social policy research has tried to identify different 'profiles' of welfare arrangements, but the results were often contradictory and contested (for an overview see Arts and Gelissen, 2002). This can in part be explained by the heterogeneity of welfare state policies. For within concrete policies, differing welfare arrangements, which are based on differing elements of the welfare culture and refer to differing policy areas, partially overlap. A comparative study by the author indicates that differences in family policies in European welfare states can largely be explained by the fact that in each welfare state two types of welfare arrangements, along with their associated cultural values and models on which they are based, overlap. On the one hand, there is the societal arrangement for the family and gender relations, and, on the other, there is the arrangement concerning social security. Both types of arrangement vary in different ways in West European welfare states (Pfau-Effinger, 2002).

For example, family policies of the Norwegian welfare state and the Danish and Finnish welfare states differ substantially in that in Norway the family is much stronger supported as a provider of social care. This type of policy is described by Esping-Andersen (1990, 1999) as a main characteristic of a conservative welfare regime, but Norway – like the other Nordic countries – can be classified as a social democratic welfare regime as far as the social security system is organised. These discrepancies can largely be explained by the fact that different family and gender arrangements and their cultural bases can be combined with a social democratic welfare regime in relation to social security and its cultural foundations. Accordingly, family policies are founded on a dual breadwinner/dual carer model as cultural model of the family in Norway, and on a dual breadwinner/state carer family model in Denmark and Finland (Pfau-Effinger, 2002).

Therefore, welfare states should not be treated as a coherent unity in cross-national comparisons and classification. Instead it should be considered that welfare state policies are often related to different, and in part overlapping, welfare arrangements – and welfare cultures on which these are based – in different policy fields which can vary across countries. It should be noted, moreover, that besides the general welfare arrangement(s) of a society, welfare arrangements also exist at

the regional/local level (Duncan and Edwards, 1998; Kröger, 1996; Mark-Lawson *et al.*, 1985). They are linked with the general arrangement, mainly by some basic ideas, but they do not necessarily form a coherent unity.

### Key elements of welfare culture

The different elements of the welfare culture refer to cultural values and ideals in relation to welfare state policies towards the structures of social inequality and the division of labour, and towards central societal institutions like the labour market and the family. They include:

*The cultural foundations of welfare state policies towards waged work and the labour market:* Welfare state policies in modern societies are based on particular ideas about what is 'normal' in relation to the structuring of employment biographies and forms of employment (Geissler, 1997; Ostner, 2000). They are also based on specific ideas about the ways in which social security and employment should be connected, and about the social groups which should be integrated into waged work and into social security. Cross-national differences exist, for example in relation to the values concerning the labour market integration of migrants and mothers of young children (Calloni and Lutz, 2000; Pfau-Effinger, 1999).

*Cultural ideas about 'social inclusion' and 'social exclusion' and the nature of citizenship:* Welfare state policies are based on specific notions of 'solidarity' and 'social integration'. Comparing France, Britain and Germany, Hilary Silver (1995) demonstrated that the importance of 'social exclusion' varies depending on whether a republican, liberal or social democratic interpretation of exclusion predominates. According to her reasoning, these cultural differences can be used to substantiate the fact that different types of welfare state pursue different migration policies.

*Cultural bases of redistribution:* Welfare state policies are based on cultural assumptions about justice in relation to redistribution (Dallinger, 2001; Hinrichs, 1997). Empirical analyses indicate that the principle of 'need' has gained importance in this respect (Bolderson and Mabbett, 1996; George and Taylor-Gooby, 1996; Daly, 1997; Ploug and Kvist, 1996). The basis is mainly created by neoliberal ideas, which emphasise personal responsibility and regard social security as desirable only for some specific groups of 'deserving' poor (see also Jordan, 1996). The notion of what is 'just' in relation to the way redistribution in tax and social security systems takes place, however, still differs substantially cross-nationally (Lund, 2002; Mau, 2004; O'Connor, 2000).

*Cultural values versus poverty:* In connection with the issue of justice, social policy research also addresses the issue of the cultural understanding of poverty, which is used as the basis for social policy (Chelf, 1992). It was argued that a new 'culture of poverty' had developed mainly in the United States (Dean, 1992; Engbersen *et al.*,

1993; Jordan *et al.*, 1992). Societal understanding of 'poverty' in many countries had shown a tendency to change (Baumann, 1998; Handler and Hasenfeld, 1991; Katz, 1989; Mann, 1994; Robertson, 1998). Societal differences of opinion about whether poverty is regarded as self-inflicted or caused by society are regarded as an important explanation of differences in social policy towards poverty in a comparison of welfare states (Kluegel and Myiano, 1995; Jordan, 1996). However, this view was questioned by van Oorschot and Halman (2000), who found that the explanation of poverty in European states does not vary systematically according to the type of welfare state. Rather it seems that, relatively, irrespective of whether people in a country tend to regard poverty as a result of poor people's own failure or the failure of social structures, the level of willingness to demonstrate solidarity differs between countries (Roller, 1999). Ethical and normative issues were also discussed in connection with poverty: to what extent may the welfare state be generous in responding to the problem that it creates dependency for its clientele and undermines their ability to help themselves?

*Cultural ideas about the state–market relationship:* Ideas differ about the degree to which state intervention in the market is most adequate (that is, neoliberal ideas versus traditional social democratic values). According to attitudinal surveys for Sweden for example, the state–market relationship is a basic variable by which citizens make their decisions in elections (Oscarsson, 1998).

*Cultural ideas about social services, the welfare mix and the family:* Welfare state policies are based on specific ideas about social services and the ways they should be provided. In particular they vary according to the extent to which the state, the family and the market are regarded as the key areas of provision (Rostgaard, 2002; Pfau-Effinger, 2005; Pfau-Effinger and Geissler, 2002). They differ regarding to which cultural model of the family they chiefly relate and how much importance is attributed to the family for the production of welfare. Dominant cultural models of the family – that is, ideas about the gender division of labour within the family and in the family–employment relationship, the main sphere for the upbringing of children and care of elderly people – differ to a substantial degree even within Western Europe (Ellingsaeter, 1999; Leira, 1992; Pfau-Effinger, 1999). In this context, the question as to how 'needs' are perceived and interpreted politically at all is also relevant (Ware and Goodin, 1990).

### **Main levels of welfare culture**

In order to develop a sufficient understanding of the relationship between welfare state policy and culture, it is necessary to differentiate between three levels of welfare culture:

- the cultural values and models in which the various policies are embedded and with which they are justified and legitimised;

- the cultural values and models in relation to the welfare state policies to which the various social groups in the respective population refer; and
- the cultural values and models which are used as a basis for discourse by the social actors, with which they wish to exert an influence on welfare state policy.

*Values and models as a basis for policies:* Legal regulations and policies are embedded in cultural values and models, with which they are justified and legitimised. The relationship between culture and welfare state policies is embedded in a specific societal context, and because of the way it has developed and been modified there is not always a clear connection between policies and cultural bases: depending on the space/time context, one and the same type of policy can be based on different cultural values and models. For this reason, similar policies also can have different effects. Vice versa, a certain value or a certain model can also be embodied in different policies which constitute functional equivalents.

*Cultural values and models which predominate in the population:* Another cultural level includes the attitudes in the population towards the welfare state. In this respect, predominant and challenging ideas (see also Kluegel, 1989) as well as marginalised ideas can be distinguished. Political elites are dependent on basing their policies on such values and models as are shared by majorities of the population if they want to continue being elected. The level of cultural values and models at which policies are aimed and the values and models which predominate in the population may change in a contrary manner relative to one another and with varying levels of dynamism in time.

*Discourses on cultural values and ideals:* Political and public discourses act as mediators between the – potentially contradictory and conflicting – cultural attitudes in the population, on the one hand, and political decisions, on the other. Within such discourses, contradictions and conflicts with regard to the cultural values and models are resolved and the values and models on which welfare state policies are based are either reproduced or modified (see also Kaufmann, 1991). Power relations between social actors play an important role in determining what cultural bases will predominate in political practice. It may also be assumed that established forms of cooperation and governance structures are significant in determining whether there will be compromises or whether individual dominant actors can assert their aims in a conflict. The other way round, discourses may also be exploited by political elites in order to alter values and models in the population in such a way that unpopular political measures gain acceptance.

### **Ideas and interests of social actors**

In all cases, culture and welfare state policies are connected via the actual or former practices of social actors, who, through their ideas, are related to the level



of welfare culture. These include collective actors – like political parties, NGOs and social movements – and ‘primary’ actors. The term ‘primary actors’ was introduced by Margaret Archer (1995) and refers to (potential) groups of actors who have similar social positions, but do not organise or express themselves as collective actors, due to lack of resources or because expressing deviating interests is politically suppressed. They are therefore not strategically involved in the attempts to bring about change but they are nevertheless social actors (Archer, 1995: 259). If actors of similar social position react to the societal context in a similar way, the aggregate effects of their behaviour may exert a strong influence on society. In particular, their role as voters is of basic importance for welfare state policies.

Social actors may be engaged in conflicts and negotiation processes about the dominant cultural values in societies. New, challenging ideas may start to compete with older ones within the cultural system if they are, for instance, imported from an international context. However, I do not suggest an idealistic approach. Welfare state policies are based on ideas, on the one hand, and on interests of social actors, on the other. In part, social groups have differing interests. The interests of social groups can differ for example on the basis of social class, gender, ethnicity or region. They can also be based on a differing position in the structures of the division of labour, for example public sector versus private sector employment. Interests and power resources differ according to the positions of these groups in social structures and in relation to the main institutions and policies of the welfare state (see also Figure 1). This is pointed out, for example, by the ‘class coalition’ approach of Esping-Andersen (1990, 1999), in which he explains why different welfare regimes have developed historically.

Ideas vary according to material interests of social groups, but ideas can also be shared by a majority of the population independent of their material interests. This is why, even if the welfare regimes of the Western world differ substantially in their basic ideas, as Esping-Andersen has shown (1990, 1999), each of them receives a high degree of support in the population (Roller, 1999). Attitudes in the United States and Germany towards equity are a good example. Haller (1989) and Wegner (1992) found that, independent of social class, in both countries predominant attitudes towards equity in the population resemble the principles of equity on which the specific welfare state is based. In Germany the majority of the population is oriented towards an intervening welfare state which diminishes social inequality, while, in the United States, the majority opinion is that equity is guaranteed best by the free working of the market. Accordingly, social inequality is broadly accepted. Ideas and interests of social actors are therefore interrelated, but in part also relatively autonomous, as Max Weber (1989, 1991); Alexander (1990); Lepsius (1990, 1995) and Archer (1995, 1996) argued in their theoretical works.

Welfare state policies are the result of conflicts, negotiations and compromises of social actors in relation to ideas, on the one hand, and interests, on

the other. Opportunities of social actors to influence welfare state policies vary, largely according to the resources they can mobilise. Conditions for social change are most suitable when the degree of integration in the cultural or social system is low and/or the conflict level between social actors in relation to ideas and/or interests is high, and if certain groups of actors endeavour to initiate cultural or structural change.

### **Culture and effects of welfare state policies on behaviour**

So far I have introduced reflections on the impact of culture on welfare state policies. However, one should consider that culture can also modify the impact of welfare state policies on the behaviour of individuals and social groups (see Figure 1). It is often assumed that the state determines behaviour: that people respond to the policymakers' policy initiatives in a specific, predictable manner and thus bring about the result intended by politics. The interrelations between welfare state policies and social practices of individuals are a more complex matter, however. The social action of individuals is not a simple outcome and not determined by state policies, although this is often assumed when statistics on behaviour (such as labour force participation rates, unemployment rates and birth rates) are used as indicators for welfare state policies. Such assumptions do not reflect the fact that the social behaviour of individuals is a process which takes place in a very complex field of influences, where cultural ideals and values also play an important role. Thus, Duncan and Edwards (1998) have criticised the assumption of 'rational economic man' on which analyses of the impact of welfare state policies on behaviour are often based. According to their argument, individuals do not simply act according to principles of 'economic rationality' but also with respect to principles of 'moral rationality'.

The effects of concrete political measures are therefore a reflection not simply of material interests of individuals but also of cultural values and ideals, which influence the degree to which policies are accepted by the population and their impact on social practices of individuals (see also Figure 1). They limit the range of options considered by social actors and shape the range of options for choice which are noticed by the individuals (see also Lepsius, 1990). This is the reason why in different societies the same type of social policies can have a different effect. The findings of a cross-national analysis of the effects of parental leave in Finland and the former Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany) are a good example: although both schemes are similar and the income replacement rate in Finland is even higher and more comprehensive, the take-up rate of the parental leave scheme is much higher in Germany than in Finland. Even if differences in the public provision of childcare are a relevant factor, the main explanation is that in West Germany, as opposed to Finland, the cultural idea about childhood is traditionally based on the assumption that the home is the best place for childcare for children below the age of three (Pfau-Effinger, 2004).

### **Change and path dependence of welfare arrangements**

A welfare arrangement can be firmly established and coherent in the long term if its cultural foundations are anchored as norms on the level of the welfare system – that is, in the societal institutions – and form the basis of the social actors' behaviour. As a result of general processes of social and cultural change, it can obviously occur that the degree of cultural and social integration of the welfare arrangement declines, and then the possibilities for social or cultural change in the welfare arrangement increase. A transformation can mainly be expected if contradictions in the arrangement are seized upon by certain social actors who endeavour to bring about change. In that case the welfare arrangement can become the object of conflict and negotiation processes by social actors concerning innovative cultural models or new institutional arrangements.

As Nullmeyer and Rüb (1993) have argued, these conflicts can also take the form of a discursively conducted 'struggle for interpretations', which precede policy change and relate to the reasons for action, the goals of action and the manners of action. If a change in policies is to be established successfully, a strong link with the cultural orientations of voters is necessary – the groups who wish to implement the change have to canvass in public debates in order to gain support for the political interpretations they offer (Bleses and Rose, 2002).

The success of such discourses is dependent on the extent to which they can pick up on trends or contradictions in the attitudes of the general population in favour of the changed values. This is demonstrated, for example, by the results of a comparative study conducted by Vivian Schmidt (2001), in which she investigated the pushing through of cost-cutting policies in liberal welfare states. In all cases the market was strengthened, and neoliberal elements were accorded greater importance. In order to implement those policies, governments established discourses which were aimed at according neoliberal values greater acceptance. Schmidt demonstrates that they were successful in the UK, where the arguments already encountered a general liberal basic attitude. In New Zealand, however, cultural attitudes in the population offered few starting points and it was not possible to the same degree to sustain such a neoliberal turning point in the long term; in New Zealand it was stopped by a referendum. Schmidt infers that the discourses were accorded an important separate meaning in pushing the policies through, and their success in terms of the implementation of a new liberal change in the cultural system was largely instrumental in determining whether a neoliberal turning point in welfare state policy had succeeded in the long term.

Actual policies in the German welfare state in relation to elderly care support the argument that the real effects of innovative welfare state policies may deviate substantially from their intention, if the cultural values to which they refer deviate from the predominant attitudes in the population. In West German opinion as well as in official political semantics, there remains a family-oriented culture

concerning responsibilities for children and elderly family members in need of care (Dallinger, 2001; Ostner, 1998). This is important in explaining why elderly people in Germany are often cared for by their relatives, mainly women, who reduce their working time or stay at home in order to provide such care. The German nursing care insurance scheme, which was implemented in 1995/1996, extended the choice for elderly people between care provided by relatives and care provided by professional caregivers. Both types of care can be paid for. Experts at the ministry responsible expected the proportion of elderly people who hired a professional carer to increase dramatically (Pabst, 1999). The effect on the increase of jobs in that field was marginal, however. Today, nursing care provided by relatives is still much more common than that provided by professional caregivers. This can, to a considerable extent, be explained by the high value placed on care by relatives in West Germany (Dallinger, 2001).

Within a particular development path, change in welfare state policies does not necessarily follow cultural change, but can develop at a different rate. Policies and their effects in such processes can be characterised by discrepancies and contradictions. The development of cultural ideals about the family, on the one hand, and family policies, on the other, in the Netherlands in the 1970s and 1980s is a good example. In the 1950s and 1960s the housewife model of the family was absolutely dominant as the cultural basis of family structures and welfare state policies (Knijn, 1998; Plantenga, 1996). Accordingly, only 4 per cent of married women were employed in the 1950s. At the end of the 1960s, however, a dramatic change in the cultural foundations of the family took place in the framework of a general 'cultural revolution'. Waged work of married women and mothers was increasingly seen as acceptable. As a consequence, labour force participation rates of women have increased dramatically since then. These changes took place, however, almost without changes in welfare state policies, which continued to promote the housewife model of the family and did not even extend public childcare provision substantially. Change here started much later, in the middle of the 1980s (Bussemaker, 1998; Plantenga, 1996; Voet, 1998). This caused serious dilemmas for employed mothers, as Knijn (1994) found in her empirical research.

In as much as transformation occurs in the institutional or cultural foundations of the welfare arrangement, it can be expected that the transformation process will usually be 'path-dependent', since basic elements of the institutional and cultural context are partially maintained. This is because the social actors in the process are still behaving under the influence of the structures and models they have challenged. The direction of the transformation is not predetermined but, since elements of continuity are generally at work, it is not free either. In the more recent discussion on path-dependence of welfare states, it is mainly the *longue durée* of the institutional foundations of welfare state policies which is analysed (Pierson, 1996, 2001). According to Esping-Andersen (1996: 6), welfare regimes evolve in a path-dependent manner, for which he attributes

responsibility to ‘institutional legacies, inherited system characteristics, and the vested interests that these cultivate’ (Esping-Andersen, 1996: 6). One should consider the fact, however, that path dependency is often also based on a *longue durée* at the cultural level (Cox, 2004; Goodin, 1996: 19). The role of culture in relation to path dependence or departure from a path once taken until now received little attention in welfare state research. In this respect, Lessenich (2003) introduced an interesting argument by taking the example of German elderly care insurance. According to his argument, those welfare states which have been built on ambivalent welfare cultures have a higher probability of path deviation than others. He reasons that ‘these welfare states, in their aim to promote a societal arrangement marked by ordered diversity and social balance, typically create political, economic and social institutions which represent an amalgam of contradicting ideas, norms and principles: market and state, autonomy and regulation, individual responsibility and social solidarity’ (Lessenich, 2003: 1–2).

In the current public discourses on crises of welfare states and the consequences of globalisation for welfare state policies, processes of renegotiation of welfare arrangements are taking place in many European societies. The renegotiation processes include the cultural ideas on the market–state relationship and on the redistributive effects of welfare state policies. New public discussions partially question the legitimacy of welfare expenditures and stress the role of the market for the provision of welfare, often based on neoliberal ideas. Other discourses are related more to the welfare mix and stress the importance of the role of civil society vis-à-vis the welfare state and for the provision of welfare, often based on communitarian ideas.

Even if these new discourses take place in many European countries, the ideas in the social context of the different societies are often adapted in specific ways, filtered in each case by the institutional and cultural particularities of the respective country (or group of countries). In the current German discourses, for example, communitarian ideas are more popular than in other European countries (Mutz, 1999; Sing, 2002). Accordingly, social scientists often see the solution to the labour market crisis as the extension of unpaid work, mainly voluntary work, rather than in a return to full employment (Beck, 2000; Kommission für Zukunftsfragen der Freistaaten Bayern und Sachsen, 1997). This can be explained by specific German cultural traditions in which actors and associations in civil society, the family and the non-profit sector were accorded a high cultural value and, in part, priority over state institutions in the provision of welfare by using the ‘subsidiarity’ principle (Effinger, 1994; Evers and Olk, 1996; Gottschall, 2001). Therefore, change in welfare state policies which is currently taking place in western Europe can be seen as a complex relationship of convergence and path dependency. The relationship between the cultural and institutional dimensions of path dependence should gain increasing attention in comparative welfare state research in future.

To conclude, it can improve our understanding of the relationship of culture and welfare state policies if we conceptualise it as a complex, multi-level relationship which is embedded into the specific context of a particular society and can develop in contradictory ways.

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