Shifting background ideas? German and English work-family policy reforms, 1998-2008

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Abstract

This article contributes to the ideational literature by delineating how actors can instigate incremental background ideational change. In common with recent scholarship it argues that instead of stable, coherent entities, background ideas are best seen as varied and disparate, containing contradictory and inconsistent elements. When actors frame their policy solutions and problems, they draw on aspects of these background ideas. In doing so, they can reshape them and institutionalise them in policy. However, actors' abilities to do so depends on the opportunities presented by the institutional context as well as the rhetorical and political resources held by the actors in question. It is argued that the interaction between levels of ideas and their relation to the actors which carry these ideas into the political arena are crucial variables in understanding ideational change. This argument is elaborated through an examination of work-family policy reform in England and Germany in the late 1990s and 2000s, which is widely considered to mark a significant policy expansion in both countries. It demonstrates that policy entrepreneurs in Germany, through their access to key decision-makers were able to make the case for work-family reform at a higher level of idea (problem definition) compared to those in England who had to hook their lower level idea (policy solution) onto already existing problem definitions. In doing so the German policy entrepreneurs were able to bring some background ideas about the family and the state into the foreground of political debate and alter them by institutionalising them in policy, in a way that their English counterparts were not.

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Introduction

Research into ideas and their effects on welfare states has, over the past few decades, developed into a large and disparate body of work united by the claim that ideas matter in explaining outcomes. Emerging out of the historical institutionalist approach, research focusing on ideas has aimed to show a distinct influence of ideational elements which cannot be reduced to institutional or structural factors (Parsons 2007). This research has tended to divide into two approaches. On the one hand, comparative research has drawn on long-standing ideas to explain relative differences in welfare state development (e.g. V. A. Schmidt 2002; Dobbin 1994). On the other, influential work has focused on episodes of dramatic changes of the ideas underpinning economic policy (e.g. Hall 1993; Blyth 2002). Both approaches tend to see ideas, particularly the taken-for-granted ideas that underpin policy, as constraining entities which impose limits on what issues can and cannot be raised in political debate. Such ideas are seen as nationally-specific, stable and changeable only in response to great crises.

However, much like the historical institutionalist literature, this conception of ideas has been criticised in that it can much better account for stability than processes of gradual change (Carstensen 2011a, 2011b). In particular, seeing ideas as inherently stable entities means that episodes of incremental ideational change are overlooked. Further, such an approach has been criticised for overweighting the structural aspect of ideas and leaving little room for political agency (V. A. Schmidt 2008). Without rejecting the concept of paradigmatic change, more recently attempts have been made to investigate incremental ideational change as an alternative way in which ideas can matter. The discursive institutionalist approach attempts to reconcile structure and agency through making the distinction between background ideas and foreground ideas and in theorising that actors have both 'background ideational abilities' and 'foreground discursive abilities' which provide them with the necessary resources to challenge seemingly stable ideas and provoke change (V. A. Schmidt 2008; Carstensen and Schmidt 2016).

This article contributes to this literature by delineating how actors can instigate background ideational change. It draws on a common distinction between three levels of ideas: policy solutions, problem definitions and background ideas (e.g. Mehta 2011). In common with recent scholarship it argues that instead of stable, coherent entities, background ideas are best seen as varied and disparate, containing contradictory and inconsistent elements. When actors frame their policy solutions and problems, they draw on aspects of these background ideas. In doing so, they can reshape them and institutionalise them in policy. However, actors' abilities to do so depends on the opportunities presented by the institutional context as well as the rhetorical and political resources held by the actors in question. It is argued that

the interaction between levels of ideas and their relation to the actors which carry these ideas into the political arena are crucial variables in understanding ideational change.

The article elaborates this argument through examination of work-family policy reform in England and Germany in the late-1990s and 2000s. In common with many high-income welfare states, both countries significantly expanded their provision of early years education and care (ECEC) during this period. This provides an appropriate empirical case for a number of reasons. First, the changes that took place in both countries have been seen as 'path shifting' in terms of the traditional approach of policy (Fleckenstein 2010, 2011; Morgan 2013). Second, family policy represents a particular pertinent case for examination of ideational dynamics, given that it is a policy area that relates to deeply held values and assumptions about 'what is good', perhaps to a greater extent than most other policy areas (Strohmeier 2002). Third, the comparative aspect provides two cases which differ in their degree of change. English work-family policies represented a new role for the state with regard to pre-school children, they also retained 'maternalist' elements in their leave policy and a commitment to market provision in childcare and early education policy (Daly 2010; Daly and Scheiwe 2010). On the other hand, Germany reforms have been seen as more dramatic, with both childcare and leave policies representing a 'Nordic turn' (Erler 2009). The German case therefore represents a situation in which background ideas fundamentally shifted during the reform period, while in England they did not. This could be seen as surprising, given that in terms of the opportunities for change, the similarities in the two countries are notable: both elected a centre-left government in the late 1990s after a long period of centre-right rule; both centre-left parties had also seen a growth in influence of women politicians, who were concerned with improving provision for women and families; in both countries women were increasingly seen as an electoral constituency which was to some extent 'up for grabs'; and both countries had over the previous decades experienced similar socio-economic changes, most notably a substantial growth in female employment, which made work-family reconciliation an issue for many families.

Through an examination of these two cases, the article explores how and when actors are able to enact significant change to background ideas. It does so first by elaborating its theoretical contribution, by showing how relaxing assumptions about ideational coherence and agency can open up space for conceptions of incremental ideational change. Furthermore, it argues that introducing the notion of a policy entrepreneur and integrating it with the common distinction of three ideational levels helps to specify how and at what level change can come about. The empirical cases follow, demonstrating that in Germany political agency was able to make a significant alteration to background ideas, while in England this did not occur. A conclusion highlights the comparison and suggests areas for further research.

The problem of incremental ideational change

The ideational literature has developed in the past few decades as a response to the stability-orientation of new institutional accounts. The emphasis that such accounts place on the constraining impact of institutionally-embedded past decisions, rules and incentives or cultural norms meant that these approaches struggled to account for institutional change, other than moments of dramatic change prompted by exogenous crises (Blyth 1997). As such they were also criticised for emphasising structural forces over agency (Hall and Taylor 1996). However, the ideational literature has come under criticism for displaying exactly the same biases (Carstensen 2011a, 2011b). With its focus on moments of 'great transformation' or 'paradigm shifts' and otherwise on comparative accounts of enduring national differences, the ideational literature has adopted a punctuated-equilibrium model of change in which long periods of ideational stability are interrupted by crisis-driven moments of uncertainty and dramatic change (e.g. Hall 1993; Blyth 2002). The problem with this approach have become apparent with the recent focus on the resilience of neo-liberalism, in which the idea's adaptability to changed circumstances and to different countries is theorised as part of its success (e.g. V. A. Schmidt 2016; V. A. Schmidt and Thatcher 2013).

Part of the solution to this stability bias is to break the concept of 'ideas' down into different levels of abstraction. A common distinction is between foreground and background ideas (Campbell 2004; V. A. Schmidt 2016, 2008). Foreground ideas are those explicitly articulated by actors in political debate. They are used to create arguments for certain courses of action and against others; they are used to persuade, as rhetorical weapons and as coalition magnets and focal points for reform (Béland and Cox 2016; Blyth 2002; Goldstein and Keohane 1993). The narrowest conception of foreground ideas are 'policy solutions' (Mehta 2011). These are the specific policy proposals which policymakers propose to address a given problem. However, successful policy solutions are not merely the best fit to a certain problem, they must also have what Hall (1989) calls 'administrative viability' and 'political viability'. In other words, they must fit with the ideas and practices of the institutional status quo, and they must also be able to attract sufficient political support.

Behind policy solutions, but still in the foreground of political debate, are 'problem definitions' (Mehta 2011). This level of idea sets the political agenda by the process of turning 'conditions' into 'problems', as Kingdon noted: "Conditions become defined as problems when we come to believe that we should do something about them. Problems are not simply the conditions or external events themselves" (Kingdon 2003, 109–10). The agenda-setting literature has long acknowledged the power of defining political problems as doing so can set the scope for acceptable policy solutions; as Schattschneider (1960, 66) famously pointed out: "the definition of alternatives is the supreme instrument of power … because the definition of alternatives is the choice of conflicts, and the choice of conflicts allocates

power". The process of defining problems involves framing, and in particular, persuading others that a specific condition is worth seeing as a problem. This is done through appealing to broader cognitive and normative 'background' ideas in order to stress the legitimacy and the necessity of a particular problem definition (V. A. Schmidt 2002).

Background ideas are "the unquestioned assumptions of a polity, the deep philosophical approaches that serve to guide action, the unconscious frames or lenses through which people see the world, and/or the meaning constellations by which people make sense of the world" (V. A. Schmidt 2016, 320). They are generally seen as more enduring than policy solutions or problem definitions as they are often related to basic principles which underpin policymaking. For example, Esping-Andersen's (1990) work touches on the enduring influence of background ideas when he discusses the relevance of liberal, conservative and social democratic principles in his 'three worlds'. As such therefore, background ideas are often conceived of as nationally specific and stable, primarily exerting a constraining influence on politics through setting the terms of what is considered a necessary and legitimate subject for foreground political action (V. A. Schmidt 2008, 2002; Vail 2014).

The assumption in much of the ideational literature is therefore that background ideas do not change (Carstensen and Hansen 2019). However, even a brief examination of the principles underpinning any welfare state demonstrate that change has taken place, albeit relatively gradually. Carstensen (2011b) suggests that one of the causes of the ideational literature's stability bias is a tendency to conceive of ideas as tightly-structured and coherent, rather than loose and potentially inconsistent. Thinking of background ideas less as a static set of concepts and more as a kind of constantly evolving 'tradition' can help resolve this problem (Bevir and Rhodes 2003). Traditions are "not fixed entities. They are not given, sat in a philological zoo, waiting for people to discover them. They are contingent, produced by the actions of individuals. The carriers of a tradition bring it to life" (Bevir and Rhodes 2003, 33). Thus traditions exist and develop through the actions of policy actors, who through their use of and appeals to background ideas can reshape them. Because of this, background ideas in particular policy areas may not be neat and coherent; they may contain tensions and contradictions between different interpretations. Such tensions may allow actors to draw out inconsistencies or to emphasise part of an idea over another part.

Furthermore, a reliance on a punctuated-equilibrium model of change has been criticised for downplaying the role of agency and overstating the structural role of ideas (Carstensen 2011a). This is problematic because ideas rely on actors; as Berman (1998, 22) has pointed out "ideas do not have any impact by themselves … [they] influence politics only by acting through or on a particular political actor". A second part of the solution to the ideational literature's stability bias therefore, is to be more precise about how and under what circumstances agency can be exerted. Campbell (2004, 68) makes

the point that in much historical institutionalist work, institutional structures are so constraining that, until a crisis punctures them and releases the power of agency, actors are "institutional dopes" blindly following institutionally-determined paths. The same criticism can be made with regard to the punctuated-equilibrium model of ideational change. In Hall's (1993) account, for example, monetarism and Keynesianism act as ready-made templates, which provide actors with what Goldstein and Keohane (1993) describe as 'road maps' of how to act. Carstensen (2011a) argues that this implies that ideas are 'internalised' by actors: policymakers working under the dominant paradigm cannot think outside this paradigm, which is why it is so confounding when it breaks down. He argues that such a model means that, most of the time, actors do not use ideas so much as are used by them: "In effect, we end up with a model of ideational structures that actors are unable to change, because they cannot think outside the structure" (Carstensen 2011a, 150) – they are ideational dopes.

As above, while this model may fit some circumstances, if it is set aside in favour of a more incremental model of change, then a more developed role for agency is necessary. If incremental change is relatively common, then actors must be able to enact this change. In Schön and Rein's (1994) terms, 'mental frames' define the way actors approach complex policy issues, but they argue that actors are both at once 'within' their frames and are also able to critically engage in 'frame reflection' in which they can re-evaluate the ideas they hold. The above distinction between background and foreground ideas creates the same dynamic: background ideas influence the way that actors think, but at the same time they are able to think outside them and act strategically in the political foreground. Bevir and Rhodes's (2003) anti-foundationalist approach takes a similar view of agency. For them, "[t]o deny that subjects can escape from all social influences is not to deny that they can act creatively for reasons that make sense to them" (Bevir and Rhodes 2003, 32). According to this view, actors exist with a 'tradition', which acts as a "background to their latent beliefs and actions without fixing them. Tradition allows for the possibility of subjects adapting, developing and even rejecting much of their heritage" (Bevir and Rhodes 2003, 32).

Such a formulation allows for an understanding of strategic agency within structural constraints, which Campbell (2004) calls 'institutional bricolage', and Carstensen (2011a) adapts to 'ideational bricolage'. Building on his critique of Hall's 'paradigm man' as having internalised the dominant paradigm, Carstensen (2011a) argues that for bricoleurs, ideas are 'outside the minds of actors', by which he means that they are not ready-made 'road maps' but need to be strategically employed by the actors in order to pursue their aims. In this conception, he argues, "ideas are used by actors, not the other way around" (Carstensen 2011a, 155). Drawing on Swidler's (1986) 'toolkit theory', he argues that actors use background ideas as a kind of resource, from which they combine ideas together in order to create new meanings. However, while the content of the new ideas is important for pursuing change, whether bricolage is successful or not depends also on the constraints of the institutional and ideational context.

Bricoleurs are not free to construct ideas exactly as they wish, their position within institutional structures is a key determinant of whether they are successful, and of the kind of ideas they are likely to produce. Bricolage is therefore primarily a pragmatic process, aimed at winning enough support to get through the political process (Campbell 2004). However, while the concept of bricolage allows space for agency so that actors 'use' ideas, it lacks specificity about how they use them and what they do with them. The concept of 'policy entrepreneurs', borrowed from the public policy literature, can help with these gaps.

Kingdon's notion of a 'policy entrepreneur' offers a number of insights which can be added to the preceding discussion to provide a more complete account of how actors use different types of ideas to push for change. Kingdon defines policy entrepreneurs as "advocates who are willing to invest their resources – time, energy, reputation, money – to promote a position in return for anticipated future gain in the form of material, purposive, or solidary benefits" (2003, 179). Entrepreneurs might be individuals, or may be members of an advocacy coalition or policy community (Haas 1992; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993). As Kingdon notes, the institutional position of a policy entrepreneur varies: "No single formal position or even informal place in the political system has a monopoly on them" (2003, 179). However, he also points out that policy entrepreneurs must have "some claim to a hearing" and "political connections", that is, they must hold an institutional position that provides them with sufficient resources to conduct policy entrepreneurship (Kingdon 2003, 180–81).

Synthesising these points about the importance of policy entrepreneurs' institutional position with the above discussion of bricolage and the different levels of ideas allows a more developed conception of a 'policy entrepreneur' to emerge, linked specifically to ideational change. In this view, policy entrepreneurs are the 'carriers' of ideas: they are political actors who strategically employ ideas to push for policy change. They aim to get their preferred policy solutions onto the political agenda. How they do this relates to their resources and abilities. Those with greater access to power, and greater political skill, will be able to 'aim higher' and define problems, those with fewer resources, or skill, will attempt to 'hook' their policy solution onto pre-existing policy problems. Defining problems confers greater advantages on the entrepreneur: those that define policy problems have greater influence over the resulting policy debate and therefore over policy solutions (Kingdon 2003; Schattschneider 1960). Policy entrepreneurs act through creatively combining and recombining the ideational resources of their context; that is, they draw on background ideas to make the case for their problems or solutions in the political foreground in order to make their preferred policies appear legitimate and necessary. They are thereby able to emphasise these aspects and downplay others (i.e. those that remain in the background) and embed these new ideas in institutions – thus altering them and their impact. Powerful policy entrepreneurs therefore, are able to seize windows of opportunity presented by political and institutional circumstances to significantly alter background ideas.

To summarise, ideas operate on different levels of abstraction. In the political foreground 'policy solutions' and 'problem definitions' are introduced by 'policy entrepreneurs'. These are political actors who strategically use ideas to put their preferred policies into practice. The extent to which they are able to do this depends on their access to decision-makers, as well as their own influence and the institutional and ideational constraints within which they operate. More successful policy entrepreneurs will be able to define problems, thereby setting a policy agenda; less successful will have to 'hook' their policy solutions onto existing problem definitions. In both cases, policy entrepreneurs use background ideas as a resource, selectively drawing on elements of national background ideas to demonstrate the legitimacy and necessity of their policy preferences. In doing so they bring background ideas into the foreground of political debate. If policy entrepreneurs do this successfully, they are able to institutionalise a new version of background ideas into a policy domain.

Work-family policy reform in England and Germany, 1997-2008

England[1]

English background ideas relating to the family are bound up with the liberal political tradition which is associated with the British welfare state. The defining feature of liberal welfare states is the primacy of the individual and the limited role of state provision, providing residual levels of cash benefits and low levels of services, relying on families and/or markets to meet the majority of people's needs (Esping-Andersen 1990; Marquand 1988). For families this has meant a focus on individuals rather than the family as an institution, with a strong division between public and private spheres. Initially these ideas were based on a gendered division of roles. Indeed, the 'marriage needs of a woman' was one of Beveridge's eight 'primary causes of need' and led to the development of family allowances and derived social security rights for women (Hantrais 1994). Husbands and wives were seen in this time as 'one of the married team' albeit a team based on difference rather than sameness, with the assumption of a male breadwinner family model. Since the 1970s ideas based on gender sameness have become more prevalent, spurred by women entering the labour market in high numbers and the enactment of equality legislation in the mid-1970s (O'Connor, Orloff, and Shaver 1999). Further, the dominance of neoliberalism in the 1980s, with its strong focus on subordinating the state to markets, saw the public/private divide "drawn more tightly", with social rights increasingly focused on individuals' employment record rather than family responsibilities, despite the continued assumption that the family is responsible for childcare (Lewis 1992, 164). Thus the liberal welfare state's separation of the public and private spheres, its assumption that families are responsible for childcare and its primary focus on individuals obscured inequalities within families and thereby resulted in the promotion of the male breadwinner family model, albeit more through a lack of intervention than through explicit promotion (O'Connor, Orloff, and Shaver 1999). It is worth noting however, that the concept of early education for pre-school children was somewhat separate to this private/public divide and had, since the 1970s, been accepted as a legitimate area for government intervention, although until the mid-1990s nothing in practice was done to achieve this on a national level (Lewis 2013).

In work-family policies, these background ideas translated into very little state interest in how families look after children. State involvement in childcare provision was almost non-existent and reserved for children deemed particularly 'at risk' (Randall, 2000). The legacy of decades of government inaction and hostility to state involvement led to the development of a childcare market, which by the 1990s was expensive and variable in terms of quality and availability across the country (Lewis 2009; Randall

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[1] This section focuses on England as early years education and care is a devolved policy area and therefore differences exist between the four nations of the UK.

2000). The situation in terms of leave policies was similarly meagre. A series of reforms in the 1980s and early 1990s had led to a complex system of maternity leave which varied from 14 to 40 weeks in length, depending on employment history. The rules about payment were also complex with different criteria of employment record determining which level of pay women received, up to a maximum of 18 weeks. However, in the 1990s there were some shifts in this approach under John Major's Conservative government. Under pressure from a resurgent Labour Party, nursery vouchers were introduced, which were designed to stimulate the market for provision of early education for four-year-olds (Land and Lewis 1998). Further, in an attempt to reduce the costs of providing benefits to lone parents, the government began to encourage lone parents into employment (DSS 1990) and limited financial help for low-income working parents towards the cost of childcare (through tax credits) was introduced in 1994 (Land and Lewis 1998). However, despite these reforms, the Conservative government remained reluctant to impose costs on business and the state, arguing that leave policies were best agreed between individual employers and their employees (e.g. Hunt 1993, 1994) and that childcare remained defined as a private issue and as a cost that ought to be borne by parents (e.g. DfEE 1996). Thus these reforms remained within the traditional background ideas.

The election of Labour in 1997 after 18 years of Conservative rule represented a window of opportunity to change these policies. Although Labour had traditionally shared the view that childcare was a private responsibility (Randall 1996, 2000), Labour strategists had in the early 1990s identified women as an electoral group that the party needed to win over (Harman 2017). The strategy to do this involved making both women and issues that women cared about more high profile within the party. However, Labour under the leadership of Tony Blair was extremely centralised, with little access to policymaking available to those outside of a small circle of MPs and advisers close to Blair and Gordon Brown, the Shadow Chancellor (Annesley and Gains 2010). Blair in particular had very clear ideas about what 'New Labour' should represent and how it should articulate its policies (Blair 1998; Mandelson and Liddle 1996). While it had been accepted that there were electoral incentives for Labour to advocate policies that would benefit women, there was not a clear sense within the New Labour hierarchy of what those policies might be[2].

Nevertheless, Labour's search for policies that could appeal to women provided opportunities to campaigners for childcare and leave policies, which were seized upon by prominent feminist MPs, particularly Harriet Harman, who worked within the party to promote the ideas of campaigners for childcare, and was a crucial policy entrepreneur in this area. These campaigners had emerged from the women's movement and approached the issue as one of women's rights; for example, in a direct

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[2] Personal interview.

challenge to the dominant background ideas the National Childcare Campaign in 1985 set out its principles as follows:

> Our starting point is that women's position in Britain is one of inequality and oppression. This is seen most visibly in the public domain ... but it is also true in private life… While there is no single cause of the inequality and oppression experienced by women, a fundamental factor is the disproportionate share that women are expected to assume in the care and upbringing of children (National Childcare Campaign 1985, 2–3).

However such approaches made little headway with the Conservatives[3] and by the early 1990s childcare was being framed as an economic issue, emphasising the benefits for the economy through taxation and use of skills, if childcare enabled more women to stay in employment (e.g. Cohen and Fraser 1991).

In 1992 Harman was appointed Shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury and worked closely with Brown, who was attempting to delineate a new approach to economic policy that could avoid accusations of relying on tax rises which had been blamed in particular for defeat in the 1992 election. Harman used this opportunity to stress the productive capacity of childcare. Arguing that childcare would allow women to return to employment, use their skills, contribute to economic growth and pay taxes, Harman stated that childcare should be "be regarded as an essential component of the economic infrastructure, just as roads, railways and telecommunications now are. If the workforce cannot get to work because there are no roads or railways, the economy is at a disadvantage. Similarly, if half the workforce cannot get to work because of lack of childcare, the economy will suffer" (Harman 1993, 111). Childcare, therefore, came onto Labour's agenda through the skilful policy entrepreneurship of Harman and the reframing of it as an economic issue that could help solve the problem of productivity. Indeed, this reframing was crucial in attracting the attention of Labour's powerful inner circle to the issue of childcare:

> In the years prior to '97 … it was quite a marginal issue, and what really changed was the way it was spoken about… what they managed to do was to persuade people, particularly Gordon Brown, that it was an economic issue. So, you had the Chancellor talking about childcare as if it mattered as productivity and that was a really major step.[4]

However, due to her exclusion from Labour's inner policymaking circles, in order to do this, it was necessary for her to hook her policy solutions onto Brown's problem definition. In reframing childcare in this way, a direct challenge to the background idea of a public/private divide was circumvented by the claim that childcare was not merely a private issue but was crucial to economic policy. This did not challenge the background ideas so much as redefine childcare as, at least partly, both private and public.

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[3] Personal interview.
[4] Personal interview.

This made the case for some state intervention, not into the family to ensure equality, but into childcare as a branch of employment policy.

A similar process took place in terms of leave policy. Once again, Harman was a link between campaigning organisations and Labour,[5] but did not have access to the higher echelons of Labour policy-making, where there was a lack of interest in what were considered relatively unimportant 'women's issues'[6]. Therefore, as in childcare the strategy for campaigners was to attempt to hook their proposed policy solution onto Labour's agenda, through stressing its compatibility to Labour's existing problem definitions. This strategy was one that campaigners had adopted under the Conservative governments, which were hostile to any notion of state responsibility in this area, and were not persuadable that gender equality or women's issues were valid reasons for government intervention.[7] As such, meagre leave provision was argued to be limiting women's labour market engagement: "the economy as a whole loses from the underutilisation of women's abilities. Getting strategies for equal opportunities right is, therefore, a matter of economic as well as social necessity" (Hewitt 1993, 104). Similar to childcare, this reframing of the case for improved leave policies hooked them onto Labour's economic problem definitions and circumvented direct challenge to background ideas about the state intervening too heavily into the market. This was important in getting the issues taken seriously by the New Labour hierarchy, as one civil servant who worked with Harman noted:

> We didn't approach it from a rights base at all, or really an equalities base, although that was Harriet's motivation and probably the motivation of a number of women parliamentarians, but the policy narrative was about efficiency … [The Treasury] started to understand that narrative and incorporate it into their day-to-day work. [8]

The route onto Labour's agenda for early education policy was far smoother. Once again it was led by a group of advocates for improved nursery provision, comprising over 40 members who would meet regularly and agree lobbying positions. This group approached early education from a child-centred perspective, arguing that "young children are important in their own right and as a resource for the future" (National Children's Bureau 1990, 1). The campaigning aim was "to change the climate" [9] (UK_19) and to communicate "the need to invest [in early education], the need for a strategic policy" [10] (UK_20). While this group had only made slow progress with the Conservative government, it was very closely linked to Margaret Hodge in the Labour Party, who acted as a policy entrepreneur.[11] Labour had been committed to nursery provision for three- and four-year-olds since 1985, and had therefore

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[5] Personal interview.
[6] Personal interviews.
[7] Personal interviews.
[8] Personal interview.
[9] Personal interview.
[10] Personal interview.
[11] Personal interviews.

already accepted the fundamental principles of the campaigners. Hodge had been leader of Islington Council where she had pioneered integrated early education and daycare centres and in the mid-1990s was responsible for producing policy on early-years education for the Shadow Cabinet. Thus by 1997, Labour had a developed early-years education policy. Campaigners had had a number of advantages in enabling them to be successful in this area. First, nursery education was already a stated aim of Labour, and had even begun to be accepted and acted on by the Conservative government in the mid-1990s. Thus there was an established problem definition focused on the lack of early education, which did not contradict background ideas about the state and the family because it was conceived of as education. [12] Further, nursery education had an effective policy entrepreneur within Labour in Margaret Hodge, who, in the words of one campaigner was "very committed and passionate about it and incredibly determined at winning extra resources for it…she was a very effective advocate." [13]

In each of these policy areas, leave, childcare and early education, the ways in which the policies were framed was reflected in the policy design. So leave policy was expanded with a strong focus on the 'business case' with a series of consultations with parents and employers before the launch of a number of incremental reforms which extended maternity leave and improved the pay, although it remained a flat-rate payment. The consultation process also led to the introduction of two weeks' paternity leave (paid at the same flat-rate level) and a right to request flexible working. The largest reforms were announced in the run-up to the 2001 elections, with the acquiescence of employer groups demonstrating that increased leave was seen as 'doing something for women' as well as labour market policy. Childcare policy was introduced through the National Childcare Strategy in 1998 which focused on supporting parents with the costs of market provision. This support was means-tested and targeted at employed parents, reinforcing that childcare was primarily seen as an employment measure. Further, the Strategy stressed the limited role of the state as "an enabler and facilitator" (DfEE and DSS 1998, 38) of a childcare market that would provide parents with choice: "It is up to parents to decide what sort of childcare they want for their children. This is not a matter for the Government" (DfEE and DSS 1998, 5). Nor was it for the state to fund the costs of expansion in their entirety as "many families are able to afford their own childcare and many employers rightly see childcare as a business investment" (DfEE and DSS 1998, 30); rather the state should seek to fill gaps in market provision. By contrast, early education policy saw the introduction of a universal entitlement to free, part-time nursery places for all three- and four-year-olds, funded by the state.

After 2001 there were attempts to bring these agendas together, in part due to dissatisfaction with the speed of childcare expansion, and children became a greater focus in policy documents (HMT et al.

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[12] Personal interview.
[13] Personal interview.

2004; DfES et al. 2002). In particular, evidence on the benefits for child development of good quality, integrated childcare and early education became influential in the Treasury and was seen as a way of reducing educational inequality and the problem of 'cycles of deprivation'. Nevertheless, Treasury officials remained wedded to a market approach, and this principle was never questioned in the numerous reviews that took place between 2001 and the second childcare strategy in 2004. Despite significantly increased investment in the early 2000s to both early education and childcare policies, the legacy of decisions and arguments made in 1998, in particular the framing of childcare as economic policy, despite being less prominent in official documents by 2004, remained the dominant attitude within the Treasury in this later period.[14]

At the Department of Trade and Industry, the new minister, Patricia Hewitt, attempted a similar reframing of what leave policy was supposed to achieve. As a feminist campaigner, Hewitt had long argued that it was important to improve leave for men, as well as women: "Opportunity at work is inseparable from responsibility at home. As long as responsibility is unequally shared at home, strategies for equality at work will remain fatally flawed." (Hewitt 1993, 169). Hewitt attempted to reframe leave as something that was beneficial for all the family, rather than primarily for women, and as such focused on problems of work-family balance (HMT and DTI 2003). This marked a contrast to previous DTI publications, in which work-family balance was discussed in terms of "creating a flexible labour market" (DTI 2000, 14). However, Hewitt struggled to shift the debate beyond these economic arguments within government and could not win support for this change among other members of the government (Hewitt 2016); according to one observer "the debate was couched in terms of women's access to the labour market, it wasn't part of a broader conversation about the nature of family life and the domestic labour and how that's split." [15] Furthermore, the 'business case' rationale which had been used to promote expansion of maternity leave and to win the assent of employers could not easily be transferred to leave for fathers and employers were fundamentally opposed to any such measures.

However, if the efficiency argument was not possible to make, nor was an equality argument. Within the Labour hierarchy there was no appetite for policies that could be interpreted as 'social engineering'.[16] While rights for mothers seemed to affirm women's 'natural' role as carers, providing leave for fathers ran the risk of being accused 'social engineering' or being the 'Nanny State', which was anathema to Labour politicians.[17] Thus Hewitt's attempt to define a new policy problem, gender inequality in the household, ran up against background ideas about the appropriate role of the state.

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[14] Personal interviews.
[15] Personal interview.
[16] Personal interviews.
[17] Personal interviews.

Lacking support within the government, she was unable to implement her desired policy proposals. Instead the issue had to be reframed as one of providing 'choice', as one observer noted:

> Tony [Blair] in particular but not just Tony, a lot of the Cabinet, were incredibly sensitive to any suggestion of the Nanny State, or telling people what to do … But in all our focus groups mothers were saying 'it's ridiculous, I want to go back to work, my husband wants to stay at home, why can't I give him three months of my leave?'. So if we put it in terms of 'this is what quite a lot of people want, they should be able to choose it', that would be seen as very acceptable and very modern, very New Labour. If we put it in terms of 'we can only get equality in the workplace if men do their bit at home and we need to force British men to be more Scandinavian' or some more elegant variation of that, Number 10 would have had a fit along with several members of the Cabinet. It would never have flown. [18]

Choice was therefore another reframing in order to fit Labour's problem definitions, and demonstrates the resilience of background ideas about the public/private divide. While it was successful in getting leave for fathers onto the agenda, it could not achieve what campaigners for a more gender-neutral system really wanted, as the same observer admitted: "what [choice] doesn't do is … use the power of government to get you to a new social norm of men taking three months leave." [19] Instead of months of leave reserved for fathers, the resulting policy was the possibility for mothers to transfer three months paid and three months unpaid leave to fathers. Despite being passed in 2006, the policy was opposed by employers and was not implemented until 2011 under a Conservative-led government.

Germany

German background ideas about the family were traditionally strongly related to the male breadwinner model family and the notion of subsidiarity, which positioned the family as the primary caregiver (Ostner and Lewis 1995). The Basic Law, introduced in 1948 as part of the creation of the West Germany state, established marriage and the family as being under special protection, which has been interpreted in practice as including an obligation on the state to support families (Moeller 1993). This has meant that in West German family policies tend to be linked to married couples rather than parents of children (Blome 2016). As the West German welfare state expanded in the 1950s dominant background normative ideas stressed the gendered division of labour and the 'natural' role for women being that of homemaker. The notion of the state assisting families by ensuring a 'family wage', sufficient to prevent mothers being forced into employment, was shared by all political parties, including women's representatives, and was reflected in the introduction of child allowances in 1954 and the 1958 introduction of tax splitting, which functioned as an employment disincentive for wives (Bleses and Seeleib-Kaiser 2004). This idea was accompanied by others about the best way to raise

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[18] Personal interview.
[19] Personal interview.

children: influenced by social science research, which linked maternal employment to negative outcomes for children, extra-familial childcare was seen as undesirable and a supplementary social assistance measure (Hagemann 2006).

In the late 1960s and 1970s these background ideas about women's role came under pressure from the student and women's movements, as well as the facts of increasing education and employment of women. Gradually a model of sequential female employment became accepted, in which women would take a 15-20 year career break in order to raise children, although it was up to families whether women took employment at all. Indeed, this period saw the withdrawal of the state from legally regulating aspects of family behaviour, influenced by the normative idea of subsidiarity, and many of the legal underpinnings of the male breadwinner model were undone (e.g. improving the legal rights of children born out of wedlock (1970) and removing women's obligation to perform housekeeping (1976)) (Ostner 1991). However, background ideas about gender roles, particularly women's role in raising children had not changed; extra-familial childcare remained negatively viewed, further stigmatised through its association with Nazi and East German family policies (Bleses and Seeleib-Kaiser 2004). This period therefore saw the notion of the state as a supporter of the family reinforced, with family allowances expanded and increased in the late-1970s with the support of both parties, and, while there was a view that families could choose how to balance work and care, background ideas about gender roles remained strong.

Innovations in family policy in the late 1970s and 1980s only modified this sequential model of employment, with the dominant ideas remaining that mothers should care for young children and then, should they choose to return to employment, should only work part-time. The 1986 parental leave law, which provided up to three years job-protected leave to parents (not just mothers) could be viewed as a shift away from the male breadwinner model, although the combination of low pay, inflexibility in how it could be taken and the lack of external childcare meant that it served primarily to facilitate the sequential model of employment for mothers (Ostner and Lewis 1995). The 1990 reunification of East and West Germany opened German family policy up to a new adult worker family model, with extensive external childcare provision. However, besides expansion of part-time childcare for children aged 3 to 6 as a compromise allowing the imposition of West Germany's more restrictive abortion law on the whole country, there was no obvious change to dominant ideas governing family policy.

Thus, the background ideas of the male breadwinner model family and of the family as welfare provider remained in place in the 1990s. The state's role an active supporter of families was reinforced by a series of judgments from the Constitutional Court, mandating an increase in child allowances (Gerlach 2010). While the state had withdrawn from prescriptive reinforcing of gender roles within household,

the norm was still for maternal care for young children, as demonstrated by the fact that Germany had one of the lowest levels of childcare attendance in the EU (Gerlach 2010).

In 1998 a centre-left coalition was elected in the federal elections. After 16 years of CDU dominance, this provided a potential window of opportunity for reform of work-family policies, as the SPD were less wedded to the male-breadwinner model family and more interested in policy to help employed women. Nevertheless the 2000 reform of parental leave marked the only significant reform in this area during the Red-Green government's first term, and itself only represented a modification of the 1986 law, adding some flexibility to how leave could be taken, and permitting a greater amount of part-time employment while receiving the parental leave benefit. As Blum (2012) notes, the reform process was closed to new ideas, with both the CDU and SPD sticking to their traditional approach to family policy. In the case of the former this was supporting the male breadwinner model family, while in the SPD policies tended to focus on individuals within the family, rather than the family per se, and on issues such as gender equality and child poverty, albeit without much enthusiasm from the largely male leadership (Blum 2012; Bothfeld 2005). This translated into a traditional attitude from the leaders of the SPD towards the family ministry: that of fundamental disinterest, and sometimes hostility, towards policies that were largely viewed as 'women's issues'[20]. As such, policies for families were seen as a niche area, of little importance compared to economic or labour market policy. The 2000 reforms therefore lacked a policy entrepreneur able or willing to convince SPD leaders that work-family policy should be a priority.

However, within the SPD's policy planning unit a working group aimed at developing policies that could help families reconcile work and family life was set up on the back of analysis of the 1998 election which showed the potential electoral success that the SPD could reap among younger voters if they addressed this issue, which was their primary concern. The aim of the group was not simply to adopt policies that would appeal to particular demographics, but to enable family policy to become a subject associated with the SPD, and therefore provide a lasting and decisive electoral advantage for the party.[21] Chancellor Gerhard Schröder in particular was interested in this, as he searched for an agenda which could demonstrate that the SPD were a modern party, with an appealing agenda beyond the traditional SPD subjects of the economy and the labour market.[22] This desire to be seen as a modern party and to build on the 1998 electoral victory provided the opportunity for new ideas about policy for families to enter the leadership of the SPD. The institutional importance of the policy planning unit, and the acquiescence of powerful actors such as Schröder created a space for a new policy agenda in this area.

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[20] Personal interview.
[21] Personal interviews.
[22] Personal interviews.

Over the next two years, this working group led by Renate Schmidt, a key policy entrepreneur, developed a series of arguments about the need for new work-family policies with a focus on the quality of life of parents. The group drew on the work of the sociologist Hans Bertram who argued against the ideas of theorists such as Beck (e.g. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995), which stated that individualism of post-industrial society was destroying the institution of the family. Bertram argued to the contrary, most young people wanted to live in conventional family structures, but that the institutional structures of support, which used to reinforce the family, were now preventing families from achieving their desired life course. This was leading to some couples foregoing the opportunity to have children, because it was too incompatible with having successful careers, while others sacrificed their careers in order to have families (Bertram, 1997). In particular, the prospect of fewer children being born was seen as a threat to Germany's future:

> Young women are today better qualified and more self-confident than ever before. They want to work: good. They might also wish for children: wonderful. However, we can observe that they are having ever fewer children: not so good … [A childless future] is a completely dreadful prospect. (Schmidt quoted in Die Zeit, 2000).

The title of Schmidt's 2002 book reflected this: "S.O.S. Family: Without children we seem old" (Schmidt, 2002).

The solution to this problem, according to Schmidt and the working group, was to recast family policy as focused on children in particular: "we need a new family policy: one which puts the child in focus. One which says: we create the conditions, we create the societal climate, in which people want to have children." (Schmidt quoted in Die Zeit, 2000). With Schröder's explicit support, this became official SPD policy at the 2001 party conference, despite opposition from the largely male leadership who maintained that family policies were unimportant. The new policy stressed that families were crucial for the future of Germany; they were, as Schröder would highlight in 2002 in the Bundestag "a policy for the centre of society" (SPD, 2001, p. 315): "Families are the stable centre of our society. Of all social networks, the family is by far the most important thing for people" (Bundestag Plenarprotokoll, 2002a). But instead of just material support, the approach was to focus on providing the conditions for young people to make the family and career choices that they wanted:

> Living and working conditions of working parents need to improve. Otherwise, there is a danger that more and more young women and men will not fulfil their wishes for children, or that those who start a family will not be able to develop their professional skills. Both would be difficult to cope with in the future. (SPD, 2001, p. 305).

During the first term of the Red-Green coalition therefore, a number of factors coalesced to provide the conditions for Schmidt to alter fundamentally the SPD's approach to the family. First, the electoral

incentives identified by the SPD planning unit created a hitherto absent interest in work-family policies among the SPD hierarchy. Schmidt's ability to define work-family balance as a crucial problem for the country was also key in persuading disinterested figures in the SPD leadership that policies for families were important. Further, Schröder's personal support, most evident at the 2001 party conference, was a key factor. Again, Schmidt's personal role as a policy entrepreneur was important here, as Schröder noted in his memoirs:

> I must admit that I needed some time to assess the societal relevance of family policy correctly… It became clear to me – especially during conversations with Renate Schmidt – that parents need more than just higher child allowances, they need a better child care infrastructure so that mothers, but also fathers, can reconcile work and family life. Because never before has there been a generation of so highly qualified women… For companies, which will have difficulties in finding qualified personnel within a few years, these women are also the qualified workforce of the future' (Schröder 2006: 439-40).)

The innovation that Schmidt introduced was to stress that work-family reconciliation was not just an issue for individual families but had serious consequences for the country as a whole. In this, Schmidt was reinforcing the background idea that families were crucial for German society, and therefore required support from the state. However, instead of families being associated with the background ideas of the male breadwinner model family and of the institution of marriage in particular, Schmidt placed a new emphasis on children: "Family is where children are" (Bundestag Plenarprotokoll, 2002a). As Schmidt had publicly stated in 2000, she aimed to maintain the centrality of families to German society, but change the emphasis of what families were and how they should behave: "We need in terms of the family a rhetorical change and we must obviously not only change the way we talk about them but also the way we think about them" (Schmidt quoted in Die Zeit, 2000). Through stressing that the main thrust of such an agenda was to support families and choice, Schröder was able to counteract opposition claims that the policy would destroy traditional families (Bundestag Plenarprotokoll, 2002a).

After the 2002 election, in which work-family balance became a central issue, Schmidt became Family Minister and continued to push this new line. On the one hand this involved continuing to develop the rationale for new policies that aid work-family balance. This was done through commissioning a series of reports highlighting the economic analyses which demonstrated the positive results of permitting more women to work, which provided a 'hard' economic aspect to the largely sociological arguments initially made by Schmidt (Jüttner, Leitner, and Rüling 2011). The appointment of Bertram to lead the expert commission charged with writing the Seventh Family Report, which set out a range of policies which could address the now well-specified problem in 2003 was also important: through examining positive examples in other countries, particularly Sweden and France, the report recommended a massive expansion of childcare provision for under-3s and a reform of parental leave, redesigning it around addressing the opportunity cost of having children, as well as introducing use-it-or-lose-it

'daddy months', in order to help shift the burden of childcare away from solely lying with women (BMFSFJ 2005). All of the significant policies that would be enacted between 2004 and 2008 were contained in the eventual report. Further, Schmidt personally persuaded business and union leaders to support reform of parental leave and childcare expansion through stressing that such policies were necessary to increase the skills available to employers.[23] A third aspect to Schmidt's policy entrepreneurship was to foster public debate.[24] She remained a high-profile politician and would regularly appear in newspapers and on television. Finally, Schmidt's citing of the birth rate tapped into an existing media debate about demographic change in relation to the financing of social insurance schemes, while the controversial elements of a politician discussing birth rates also did no harm to the level of public exposure.[25]

While the SPD managed to enact childcare expansion in 2004, the following year saw the party lose the federal election and while remaining in government as the junior partner in a grand coalition, it lost control of the Family Ministry. However, Ursula von der Leyen, the new CDU minister, followed Schmidt's policy direction. According to a number of civil servants, von der Leyen had a copy of Schmidt's book, 'Family Brings Profit' (R. Schmidt and Mohn 2004), and announced that she supported everything in the book and she wanted to "continue but do more"[26].

The new minister proved just as effective an policy entrepreneur as Schmidt had been. Through building on and mobilising the advocacy coalition that Schmidt had originally forged, von der Leyen faced very little external opposition to her plans for policy expansion. It was senior colleagues in the CDU and the CSU who would prove the largest hurdles to overcome, especially among the more conservative elements who disapproved of maternal employment and extra-familial care. Indeed, von der Leyen deliberately built on the public acceptance of the need for better work-life balance that Schmidt had fostered to conduct many of the intra-party debates in public. This was a strategy that had been introduced in the ministry by Schmidt and was backed up through extensive public polling.[27] Von der Leyen could therefore be confident that by engaging in public debate over the policies, she would be able to put pressure on her colleagues to accept change. The terms of these debates, with von der Leyen on one side with business leaders, unions, moderate members of the CDU as well as from other major parties, family organisations and academics, and on the other side relatively few male politicians and some senior religious figures, demonstrated that background ideas had shifted. Due to Schmidt and then von der Leyen's policy entrepreneurship, it was clear that while families retained a vital role in German

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[23] Personal interviews.
[24] Personal interviews.
[25] Personal interviews.
[26] Personal interviews.
[27] Personal interview.

society, and the state was crucial in supporting them, the terms of this support had changed. It was no longer enough to provide financial assistance and assume that mothers would undertake childcare; the new background ideas saw the role of the state as providing support for families to organise their careers and family lives how they chose. This was enacted between 2006 and 2008 through the reform of parental leave and another large-scale investment in childcare.

Conclusion

This paper has added to the growing literature on how background change in an incremental fashion. It has done so by stressing that it is crucial to have a conception of ideas and agency that permit room for change, without abandoning the point that background ideas are largely constraining forces. Through incorporating the notion of the three levels of ideas, with that of the 'policy entrepreneur', the paper has attempted to elucidate how political actors can instigate change in background ideas. The cases of English and German work-family policy reforms between 1997 and 2008 were used to elaborate this. In the former, Harriet Harman and other key policy entrepreneurs were denied direct access to decision-making and therefore had to reframe their policy solutions to hook them onto Labour's already defined problem definitions. By contrast, Renate Schmidt in Germany had greater access to the SPD decision-makers, in no small part due to Gerhard Schröder's belief that this could provide his party with electoral gains. This meant that Schmidt was able not only to suggest policy solutions, as her English policy entrepreneur counterparts had successfully done, but also to define a problem. This, as noted earlier, provided her with much more influence on the policy solutions that could be attached to her problem, in comparison to Harman.

During these processes, Schmidt and von der Leyen were able to challenge and alter some of the German background ideas which underpin family policy in a way that their English counterparts were not. In making the case for her new problem definition, Schmidt reaffirmed that the family was central to German social policy, but background ideas about what a family is and how it should be supported by the state would change. In England, because the policy solutions were reframed in economic terms, they avoided any clash with background ideas about the family which would have blocked them from rising further up Labour's agenda, in particular the idea of public and private realms. This can be seen by the unsuccessful attempts by Patricia Hewitt to pivot towards a less 'maternalist' leave policy architecture. As such, German background ideas about the family changed in this period, albeit only incrementally, while less change is visible in English ideas.

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