Institutions and Discourses on Childcare for Children Under the Age of Three in a Comparative French-Czech Perspective

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Abstract
The article compares the development of policies pertaining to care for preschool children in the course of the second half of the 20th century in France and in the Czech Republic. It aims at identifying the key factors that led to the differentiation of the policies and institutions in the two countries, especially with respect to support for extra-familial care and formal care institutions (nurseries). We build on the theories of ‘new’ institutionalisms and we apply framing analysis, which allows us to understand the formation of ideas that precede policy changes. Specifically, we discuss the role of expert discourse and the framings of care for young children in the process of social policy change. We argue that expert knowledge in interaction with the political, economic, and demographic contexts and how it has been presented in public have had a fundamental impact on the formation of childcare policies and institutions in the two countries.

Keywords
childcare, discourse, expert knowledge, institutional development

This article presents a comparative analysis of the development of discourses, institutions, and policies of care for children under the age of three in France and the Czech Republic in the second half of the 20th century. Despite their different pasts, these
two societies have had several things in common: First, they both had a tradition of taking pro-natal factors into account when designing childcare policies (Hašková et al., 2009; King, 1998). Second, the main outline of childcare institutions in the two countries was originally very similar: Both countries traditionally had separate childcare institutions for children of preschool age—health-oriented nurseries for children below the age of three and pedagogically oriented kindergartens for preschool children aged three and older, with a good reputation among experts and parents (Hašková et al., 2009; King, 1998). While hygiene and health prevention were accentuated in nurseries employing mainly paediatric nurses and doctors, preparation for education was accentuated in kindergartens employing mainly preschool teachers (Hašková et al., 2009; King, 1998; Sullerot, 1981). Nurseries and kindergartens became mostly all-day facilities in both countries rather early in comparison with other countries in Europe: since the late 1940s (Hašková et al., 2009; Saltiel and Sullerot, 1974). Both countries offer three-year parental leave with a parental allowance, and the monthly allowance in relation to the average wage was similar until the allowance increased in the Czech Republic in 2007. In both countries, the allowance was first designed for higher order children, and only later was it granted to the first child in the family, although for a limited time in case of only one child in the family in France (Hašková et al., 2009; Saltiel and Sullerot, 1974).

Nonetheless, policies and institutions in the two countries developed over time in very different directions. In France, the parental allowance can be combined with part-time employment and parents are offered significant financial support for non-parental care. Moreover, since 2015, French parental leave, as well as the allowance, includes non-transferable parts for both parents. The Czech law states that only the parent providing full-time care is entitled to the parental allowance (since 2004, a parent can be employed without restrictions but cannot use childcare facilities for more than a very limited number of hours per month; since 2012, the limited number of hours applies only to children under the age of two). In France, many measures supporting alternative types of childcare have been adopted and nurseries moved away from the health-oriented model. In the Czech Republic, most nurseries have been closed since the beginning of the 1990s, but the health-oriented model was so entrenched that it had blocked development of any alternative types of childcare (Hašková and Saxonberg, 2016).

Currently, there are considerable differences between the available options, opinions, and practices of the French and Czech populations as regards caring for children under the age of three (Hašková and Saxonberg, 2016; Pélamourguès and Thibault, 2010). In 2014, in France, 59% of mothers with a child under the age of three were in paid employment, while 22% of mothers of children under three did in the Czech Republic (OECD, 2016). In France, 50% of children under the age of three were enrolled in formal care or preschool in 2013, while only 4% of children in this age group attended any type of formal care in the Czech Republic (OECD, 2016). Moreover, it is widely accepted that a child under the age of three attend all-day formal childcare among French mothers, while 78% of Czech mothers with a preschool child consider it the best to stay at home full-time when the child is between two and three years. Only when the child is between three and five years, a majority of them consider it the best to start working in paid employment (again) (Credoc, 2003; Paloncyová et al., 2014).
What is the source of these differences? We uncover the factors that have influenced childcare policies and institutions in both countries in the course of the second half of the 20th century. We focus on the ‘formative moments’ (Peters et al., 2005)—periods of time when significant change in policies and institutions occurred. Specifically, we are interested in the different ways in which care for young children was framed by different actors and in how these framings, in interaction with socio-political and economic contexts, influenced policy-making during the analysed formative moments. We focus on the time period between the 1950s and 2012 that set the path for the divergent development of the policies and institutions. We do not aim presenting the latest changes to childcare policies in the two countries. By means of presenting a historical case, our article aims to contribute to the debate on the role of ideas and discourses in the process of policy change.

Institutions and discourses

In the last three decades, a new approach to studying institutions was developed that draws attention to the influence that cultural meanings, ideas, and discourses have on the structuring of institutions, including social policy (Padamsee, 2009; Schmidt, 2010). This approach provides a dynamic approach to institutional change by introducing the role of ideas and/or discourse in institutional change. Steinmo (2008) observes that more recent work on institutional development shows that institutional change results from changes in ideas among actors: Change becomes possible ‘when powerful actors have the will and ability to change institutions in favour of new ideas’ (p. 131). According to Kulawik (2009), institutions are constituted by discursive struggles and can be understood as sedimented discourses. Institutions should not be treated as neutral structures of incentives but, rather, as the carriers of ideas which make them objects of mis/trust, that change over time as actors’ ideas and discourse about them change (Rothstein, 2005: 168–198 in Schmidt, 2010: 9). ‘How ideas are generated among policy actors and communicated to the public by political actors through discourse is the key to explaining institutional change (and continuity)’ (Schmidt, 2010: 15).

In our analysis, we identify formative moments at which a window of opportunity opened up to assert a new policy programme. According to Donnelly and Hogan, a critical juncture (formative moment) that sets institutional change in motion consists of crisis, ideational change, and subsequently radical policy change, that is, altogether, it may cover a relatively long period of time. The ‘crisis’ can be anything from wars, revolutions, and economic crisis to demographic changes (Donnelly and Hogan, 2012). All four formative moments that we analyse started with such a ‘crisis’—political upheavals and socio-demographic changes in France in the late 1960s/early 1970s and an economic crisis in the first half of the 1980s, a communist putsch in the Czech Republic in 1948, and a political crisis in 1968 (preceded by economic crisis and demographic changes in the 1960s). The ‘crisis’ entails that the existing policy cannot be sustained (without deterioration). The ‘crisis’ may lead to the opening of a window of opportunity, for example, the exchange of leading elites (Garrett and Lange, 1995). Other authors show that a ‘crisis’ is not required for policy change to occur—it may be triggered just by uncertainty over a problem (Meijerink, 2005).
Moreover, the ‘crisis’ can result in only minor adjustments to a particular policy when it is not accompanied by ideational change, in which case the critical juncture does not occur (Donnelly and Hogan, 2012: 344).

The ideational change (a change in the ideas underlying policies) determines whether the critical juncture will occur (Donnelly and Hogan, 2012) and the direction that the policy change will take. In this article, we focus on this stage of the process of institutional change. How does the ideational change occur? Where do the new ideas come from and how do they become the ‘carriers’ of new policies?

**Expert discourses**

Experts played an important role in formulating childcare policies in state socialist countries. Experts’ input was applied to those policy issues that were problematic but did not threaten the existing political order or leaders (Wolchik, 1983: 115). In state socialist Czechoslovakia, the State Population Commission (from 1971 the Governmental Population Commission) was the main channel through which experts exercised an influence on the political elites. The commission had the authority and the power to propose new legislation (Dudová, 2012; Heitlinger, 1987). In France, experts have been commissioned to write reports and speak at hearings by the President of the Republic, the Prime Minister, the Senate, or the Parliament (or other executive or legislative body) or being part of a state expert structure (commissions and councils; Restier-Melleray, 1990). According to Kulawik (2009), expert knowledge plays a special role in the national discourses of all modern states (pp. 268–269). Given that the form and content of the expert discourse differed in the two countries, the comparison allows us to trace the influence of experts on childcare policies and institutions.

When comparing the expert discourse in the two countries, we adhere to Schmidt’s definition of discourse and Foucault’s (1980) and Schneck’s (1987) understanding of knowledge and (scientific) ‘truth’. Discourse encompasses not only the substantive content of ideas but also the interactive processes by which the ideas are ‘conveyed’ (Schmidt, 2008: 305). Knowledge is considered to be a product of human communication (Schneck, 1987: 18). To know is not to discover the truth but to make the truth—and in every society and period, there are different ‘regimes of truth’ (Foucault, 1980: 131).

**Methodology and methods**

In our analysis of discourse, we use the approach of framing analysis (Donati, 1992; Entman, 1993; Snow and Benford, 1988). Frames work as the guiding models for what is to be understood in the discourse. Framing is the action of selecting some aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient in a text in such a way as to promote a particular definition of a problem, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or recommended solution (Entman, 1993: 52).

We focus on the frames employed by experts and used by other political actors in the process of legitimating or arguing against certain policies and institutions. The frame that becomes dominant in the political and public debate is decisive for the prevailing definition of the problem and for creating policies and indicating which
institutions get support (Kulawik, 2009). Although we focus on expert discourse, we cannot omit its interaction and interdependence with other factors, such as the country’s political and economic situation, and the impact of generational change and social movements (Padamsee, 2009: 414).

First, we followed the approach by Donati (1992) that consists of the following steps:

1. Topic selection and definition, which means choosing a social or political issue: The issue we research is childcare and the object that is framed in the discussions is ‘proper care’ for a young child.

2. Texts selection because texts represent relevant voices from the discourse: We analysed documents relating to childcare and focused on the period from the mid-1950s to 2012. The documents included (1) legal regulations pertaining to childcare, (2) published scholarship on childcare, (3) books and articles popularising expert knowledge pertaining to care for children under the age of three, (4) statistics on the public opinions and the use of different types of childcare, and (5) interviews with experts on the issue. In the case of France, we included official reports prepared by (or for) different governments and parliamentary bodies. In the case of the Czech Republic, we analysed parliamentary debates, official government statements, and—for the period before 1989—reports from the State (later Governmental) Population Commission.

As for the analysis of popular media, in the case of France we analysed the magazine *L’Ecole des Parents* (Parents’ School), in addition to the popular monographs on the issue. This journal was first published in the 1950s and has since remained very popular. For the Czech Republic, we looked at popular books on childcare and articles on this issue in the magazine *Vlasta* (a woman’s name). This magazine was first published in the late 1940s and it became the second most-read periodical in Czechoslovakia throughout the 1950s–1980s. It regularly covered such issues as family, child psychology, education, and lifestyle. We focused mainly on the time periods around the major policy changes: the 1970s and the second half of the 1980s/early 1990s in France, and the early 1950s and early 1970s in the Czechoslovakia.

3. Identifying and describing the frames: The method of identifying the frames was inspired by the grounded theory methodology, as applied to the text analysis. With the assistance of the computer program ATLAS.ti, the individual arguments used in the texts were identified, coded, and then grouped into categories through comparisons on multiple, intratexual, and intertextual levels (e.g. comparisons of different codes and ‘families of codes’ and comparisons of texts of different authors and types of sources) until several ‘systems’ of argumentation emerged. After having identified the frames, we specified the frame’s main characteristics. We analysed by whom was the frame used and what were the means of presentation and communication of the frame.

4. Inspired by Snow and Benford (1988), we added a fourth step to Donati’s approach: We analysed the relationships between the frames in order to explain their success in influencing the policies (see also Dudová, 2010).
Short overview of childcare policies and institutions in France and the Czech Republic

The post-war development of childcare policies in France was marked by a gender-conservative family policy tradition. Nonetheless, the post-war generation of women obtained much higher education than their mothers, entered the job market in the late 1960s/early 1970s, and began to realise their reproductive plans (Saltiel and Sullerot, 1974: 13–19). Consequently, a demand to expand formal care for small children increased (Cuvillier, 1977), and the gender-conservative design of family policy was reduced (namely, ‘the single-income benefit’ — Allocation du salaire unique was partially compensated for in 1972 by the ‘childcare allowance’ — Allocation pour frais de garde and in 1977 was withdrawn; Laroque, 1985). Like in Czechoslovakia, kindergartens at that time fell under and still fall under the authority of the Ministry of Education, and they are part of the education system; the institutions that provide care for children under the age of three were and still are overseen by the Ministry of Health. In the post-war period, the capacity of nurseries was small, they had a poor reputation among parents and professionals, and they served more as a form of assistance to parents in need (e.g. lone mothers). Given the high rate of child mortality in the post-war period, hygienic standards were a primary concern of nurseries (Sullerot, 1981: 150).

From the 1960s, the psycho-pedagogical model of care and education in nurseries had already begun to move to the fore. A regulation from 1975 raised the teaching qualifications required of nursery staff and abolished some of the strict hygiene regulations; the popularity of nurseries among French parents grew (Neyrand, 1999). State support for nurseries increased with the objective of expanding their capacity and improving the qualifications of the staff (Laroque, 1985: 334). The late 1960s/early 1970s can be considered as a ‘crisis’ that puts in motion ideational change, and subsequently a radical policy change, that is, the first formative moment in the development of childcare institutions in France after the Second World War. The ‘crisis’ contributed to an important change in the discourse and subsequently in the design and support of formal childcare for children below the age of three. Important confirmation of the previously set official support for formal childcare for children below the age of three occurred in the 1980s, when a left-wing government was formed. After the publication of the report L’enfant dans la vie (The Child in Life, Bouyala and Roussille, 1982), commissioned by the government’s State Secretary for the Family by a group of experts, the Caisses d’Allocations Familiales (CAF, Fund of Family Allocations), the state body that finances family policy, declared nurseries its priority (Math and Renaudat, 1997: 6).

The monetary crisis in 1982–1983, weak economic growth, and high unemployment that dominated the 1980s influenced further development in childcare policy (Laroque, 1985: 31–32). The second half of the 1980s, when the right won the elections, saw a drift away from support for nurseries, and state support was transferred to alternative types of care with the aim of reducing costs. Financial help has been directed to parents employing either a nanny or an ‘assistant maternel’ (a state-subsidised nanny caring for children from more than one family) or to stay-at-home parents caring themselves for their children (Daune-Richard, 1999: 42). Childcare policies were no longer directed at achieving equality for men and women but rather at the ‘freedom of choice’ of parents to decide.
how their children would be cared for (Eldén and Anving, 2016; Martin, 2010: 412; Steck, 1994: 43–45 to compare the use of the ‘freedom of choice’ frame in Norway recently). The pro-natalist discourse, gaining new impetus in the late 1970s and the 1980s when the birth rate fell below the replacement level, also supported the policy changes, in particular the introduction of *Allocation parentale d’éducation* (APE, parental benefit of education), the measure supporting maternal (parental) care in the home, in 1984 and its extensions in 1986 and 1994 (King, 1998). The period around the mid-1980s can, thus, be regarded as the second formative moment in the development of childcare institutions in France after the Second World War because the policies supporting alternative and informal types of care have been given priority since then.

In the 1990s, several attempts were made to reform childcare policies and institutions in France. In 2004, based on ‘free choice’ rhetoric, the existing allowances for childcare were replaced by one multicomponent allowance. This reform did not fundamentally change the global rationale though (Martin, 2010). The development after 2007 suggested that the rhetoric of economic liberalism has gained ground, buttressed by the arguments of the global economic crisis, which gave little reason to expect significant changes to the existing path of childcare policy in France (Martin, 2010). Although French parental leave changed in 2015 to motivate men to participate on leave, the ‘free choice’ rhetoric remained dominant, especially on childcare services for children under the age of three.

Like in France, post-war Czech society witnessed a drift away from the male breadwinner model. The communists’ ideal woman was employed mother, freed from economic dependency on the man; the centrally planned economy suffered from a shortage of labour, and the post-war economic situation of households also contributed to the growth of women’s employment. In 1948, kindergartens were incorporated into the education system and came under the authority of the Ministry of Education. Nurseries were ranked as preventive health care facilities and as such fell under the authority of the Ministry of Health in 1951 (Hašková and Saxonberg, 2016). This is the first formative moment in the post-war development of childcare institutions in Czechoslovakia because it is when the strict division of institutional care for children under and over the age of three was legislated. Before the Second World War, several types of formal childcare existed in the country. They were under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Social Care. The boundaries between the existing types of childcare were often blurred (Saxonberg et al., 2012). In the first years after the communist putsch, a number of laws were quickly approved to conform to the Soviet model with no proper discussion preceding them. The new legislation on childcare institutions followed the Soviet model, while inclusion of nurseries under the Ministry of Health was also supported by the argument of reducing infant mortality (Sinkulová, 1950).

The rapid rise of women’s employment was not met with an adequate increase in childcare facilities; the low-wage income policy meant that there was little demand for reduced hours and that employers were reluctant to offer part-time jobs. The increase in women’s employment was accompanied by a decrease in fertility since the second half of the 1950s. In 1957, the State Population Commission was set up to address the problem of low fertility (among others). In the 1960s, the Commission proposed to introduce an ‘extended maternity leave’ and a homecare allowance, which were intended to be
gradually extended up to three years in order to reduce the demand on nurseries (Klíma, 1969) because nurseries were criticised for being costly and even harmful to children (Bařinová, 1965; Damborská, 1957; Koch, 1961), while there was no longer a labour shortage in feminised sectors of labour market during the economic recession in the 1960s (Hašková et al., 2009). Moreover, employed mothers were criticised for staying at home with their infants frequently due to high illness rates of children attending nurseries (Kuncová, 1963). The introduction of legislation on ‘extended maternity leave’ and homecare allowance that followed discursive struggles of the 1960s constituted the second formative moment in the development of childcare policies in Czechoslovakia since the Second World War. These developments helped to ingrain the ideal that up to the age of three children should have full-time maternal care, and thus changed ever since the orientation of childcare policies in the country (Hašková and Saxonberg, 2016). As population polls show, full-time maternal childcare for children up to the age of three became internalised as a social norm already in the 1970s in Czech society (Čákiová, 1977; Kreipl et al., 1979).

Despite the revolutionary changes after 1989, Czech childcare policy exhibited overall continuity (Hašková and Saxonberg, 2016). The homecare allowance was extended to up to four years in the mid-1990s, but parental leave remained only three years in length. Thus, three-year interruptions of mothers’ employment remained the dominant pattern (Hašková and Klenner, 2010). Nurseries lost state financial support and became too expensive. Consequently, almost all of them quickly disappeared (Hašková et al., 2009). As it was already the norm that women were interrupting their careers for three-year periods to take care of their children, there was no public protest against cancelling state subsidies for nurseries. The legislation on childcare for children under the age of three has remained based on medical requirements so that even private child-minders were required to have a medical education (Hašková and Saxonberg, 2016). Thus, the historical legacy even constrained the establishment of alternative types of childcare. After 2002, the homecare allowance was made more flexible to conform to European Union (EU) requirements and demands from new women’s organisations. However, even if mothers want to return to paid employment earlier, they have few opportunities to do so, since formal care is mostly unavailable (Hašková and Saxonberg, 2016).

**The discourse and framing of childcare**

In order to explain the differences in the childcare policies and institutions in the Czech Republic and in France, it is crucial to understand the development of the discourse on childcare in these countries. We identified several framings that influenced the institutions and discovered interdependence of several main discourses: the discourse of early-childhood experts in the fields of psychology, pedagogy, and paediatrics; the discourse of the women’s movement and women’s organisations; and the economic discourse by administrative officials in France and by economic experts in Czechoslovakia. Some of the frames within these discourses aligned and produced frame resonance (Snow and Benford, 1988). In consequence, they were able to direct the resulting new shape of institutions. Those frames that did not find alignment with other frames were suppressed.
There was one more important framing in both countries: The frame ‘our nation is dying’ was used in Czechoslovakia from the 1960s (Nash, 2005) and in France from 1975 (King, 1998) when birth rates declined. However, we do not focus in detail on the pro-natalist frame here, as it has not influenced the direction of childcare policy changes per se in the two countries. This frame has been activated in conjunction with other frames in order to increase the salience of the problems and their policy solutions defined within the other frames. The pro-natalist frame co-determined whether the formative moment occurred but did not have a major impact on the direction that the childcare policy change took since the decrease in fertility may translate into different childcare policy options—an increase in the length of parental leave (like in Czechoslovakia) or an increase in the investments into formal childcare (like in France).

All the frames operated within socio-political and economic contexts that were different in the two countries. The socio-political context indeed influenced the structure and the rules of the discourse: who had the right to enter into the debates, which means of communication could have been used, and what arguments were excluded beforehand from the debate. In Czechoslovakia, the communication media were limited in scope and content (due to the censorship and the official propaganda) in the late 1940s and the 1950s. Nonetheless, in the politically more opened atmosphere of the 1960s, new actors and ideas entered the stage. Most notably, experts were in certain areas given high coverage even in the popular media, and their recommendations were taken seriously by the policy-makers (Wolchik, 1983).

In both countries, the ‘success’ of a specific framing was also influenced by its resonance within the lived world of potential participants and with ‘the larger belief system or ideology’ (Snow and Benford, 1988: 205). This partly explains the success of the familialist expert discourse in the second formative moment in Czechoslovakia that led to gradual extension of the paid leave for mothers up to three years. A population disgusted by the political situation after 1968 welcomed the opportunity to retreat to the privacy of their families (Heitlinger, 1996). The resonance of particular framing within the lived world of people also contributes to explaining the success of the women’s movement’s discourse in the first analysed formative moment in France: The post-war baby boom generation of women, who were obtaining much higher education than their mothers, were unwilling to content themselves with the role of housewife (Saltiel and Sullerot, 1974). These external factors have co-determined the ‘success’ or the ‘failure’ of a given frame in the discursive struggles over the organisation of childcare. In the following sections, we present the development of the framings that brought about the ideational change that triggered the institutional change in France and in the Czech Republic. We show how the consensus was achieved through frame alignments, leading to the activation of one ‘master frame’ that directed the institutional change. We show the importance of the expert framings in the discursive struggles preceding the change of institutions and policies.

The early-childhood expert frames

In France, expert discourse on childcare in the 1950s was dominated by psychoanalysis and the theories of hospitalism and maternal deprivation (Neyrand, 1999). Nonetheless, since the 1960s, a new psycho-pedagogical framing moved to the fore. A number of experts
questioned the importance of the mother–child relationship. The popular childhood psychologist Dolto not only stressed the importance of the parent–child relationship but also highlighted the importance of socialisation with peers for babies and acknowledged the harmlessness of institutional care (Dolto, 1977). The work of Badinter challenged the idea of the ‘maternal instinct’ (Badinter, 1981). In the late 1960s, 11 experts were appointed by the director of the Caisse nationale d’allocations familiales (CNAF), (state body financing family policy) to study the conditions of childcare in France and to formulate recommendations in this area. The outcome was a very influential book, which challenged the belief that maternal care is ‘the best and the most natural thing’ (Soulé, 1972: 26):

The mothers often, when they are not helped, find in this duty more frustration and dissatisfaction than gratification, and thus they risk to create a pathological relationship to the child characterised by the over-investment, isolation of the dyad, or on the contrary, by indifference. (Soulé, 1972: 25)

During the 1970s, several empirical studies were conducted in France that aimed to determine the effects of different forms of childcare on the wellbeing of children (Mermillod and Rossignol, 1974). The results, widely quoted and used as ‘scientific arguments’ in policy reports and hearings, concluded that the effect of the form of childcare depended on the socio-economic status of the parents, not the form of childcare per se:

The harmonious physical and affective development of children, the absence of function troubles can be found in the same proportions in children cared for by their mother as well as those spending their days in a stable childcare institution. (Davidson, 1980 in Sullerot, 1981: 155)

Moreover, nurseries started to be seen by some experts as playing an important role in equalising the opportunities of children (Sullerot, 1981).

All these experts appeared in the media and were quoted in legal documents. In their studies and in government reports, a new framing of care for children under the age of three was employed. The frame ‘even babies need education’ accentuated the positive socialising role of collective childcare institutions and the interdependence of the interests of the child and the mother. It dominated the writings and speeches of psychologists and education experts and was popularised by the media. The view came to be accepted that people other than the parents can—and even should—provide childcare, not as substitutes for the maternal (paternal) care but in an educational relationship with the child (Neyrand, 1999):

The systematic studies of the behaviour of 12–24 months old children … revealed that … children carry out joint activities. … Not only they do not bother each other, but they share their ideas with others who participate in joint activities: thus they use the presence of others to enrich their own course of action. (Rayna and Stambak, 1985: 28)

The nursery … is beneficial for the child, when it takes into account the basic needs of the child and organises the triangular relationship between the parents, the child and the staff. (Norvez, 1990: 327)
This expert knowledge had an impact on the legislation in France: Since the 1970s, nurseries accentuated other needs than just the children’s health; practices focusing on the development and socialisation of children were introduced; nurses (in childcare institutions) were thereafter called ‘educators’. This frame was successfully communicated to the public (Math and Renaudat, 1997).

In Czechoslovakia, in the 1950s, public opinion was dominated by conservative attitudes towards non-parental care for children under the age of three similar to those observed in France at that time (Srb and Kučera, 1959). However, the change in the country’s political direction marked the start of an effort to alter this view: Nurseries were framed as ‘necessary to build socialist society and to free women for new tasks’ (Srb and Kučera, 1959). Similarly to France, only the health needs of children were emphasised in nurseries at that time (Langmeier and Matějček, 1974 [1963]).

In the next decade, the discourse underwent a fundamental change. Like in France, the input of psychologists into the discourse began to play a bigger role, but the content of their statements was different. Psychologists and paediatricians working in children’s homes had long observed a higher incidence of disturbances in the psychological development of institutionalised children (e.g. Koch, 1963). The cause was identified mainly as their emotional deprivation, which was explained as resulting from the child’s long separation from his or her mother and the fact that this happened at a young age (Langmeier and Matějček, 1974 [1963]). Although it might seem that studies on emotionally deprived and abandoned children have nothing in common with facilities caring for children of employed parents, this was not the case in Czech society. During the 1950s, because of the operating hours of production enterprises, there was a need to increase the number of nurseries with week-long and non-stop service, and such institutions were not unlike permanent childcare institutions, as the children spent more time there than in the family environment (Langmeier and Matějček, 1974 [1963]). But under the influence of writings by clinical psychologists and paediatricians, the number of nurseries with week-long or non-stop service already began to decrease in the 1960s in favour of daytime nurseries:

If we examine collective facilities regarding the time which a child spends there, we must principally differentiate day institutions and week institutions. … In both cases, the mechanism leading to deprivation may indeed be activated, but the risk of this happening and the ratio of these factors is very different. … While we characterise the stay of a child before the age of three in a permanent care institution as ‘dangerous’, we can call his situation in day nurseries ‘difficult’ at most. (Langmeier and Matějček, 1974 [1963]: 125)

However, psychologists and paediatricians agreed neither with the long hours in daytime nurseries—on average, 9 hours 6 days a week (Dunovský and Suchá, 1967). The experts, thus, strove to have the operating hours of nurseries reduced and maternity leave extended so that separation from the primary carer would be shorter and occur later (Dunovský and Suchá, 1967).

As Langmeier and Matějček (1974 [1963]) noted, separation and deprivation literally began to mean the same thing in the Czech discourse on childcare as the conclusions from expert observations in homes for abandoned infants and week-long nurseries were
extended also to day care institutions. Psychological expert discourse was successfully communicated to the public through popular-instructional literature for parents.

Moreover, paediatricians in Czechoslovakia criticised the higher illness rate of children attending nurseries. They associated this with the fact that they had to get up early and leave the nurseries late in order to accommodate their mothers’ long hours in paid employment (Dunovský and Suchá, 1967):

One of the main problems children face in nurseries is a higher illness rate than for children brought up at home. (Bařinová, 1965: 11)

The average length of a child’s day stay in a nursery is almost 9 hours. With the necessary twelve-hour sleep and an average of 40 (2 x 20) minutes for travel, precious little time is left for the family. (Dunovský and Suchá, 1967: 20)

The younger the child in a nursery, the more often s/he gets sick. (Dunovský, 1971: 154)

The frame ‘young children should be at home with their mother’ put forth by psychologists and paediatricians was then used by the politicians to extending maternity leave to 1 year in 1964 and—in the late 1960s—to setting up a plan to extend paid maternity leave up to three years (Klíma, 1969). The plan to extend the leave up to three years was then put into practice from the beginning of the 1970s until the end of the 1980s (Hašková et al., 2011).

Interesting is the general absence of any pedagogical voices in the discourse on early childhood in Czechoslovakia. The paediatricians and children’s nurses who were responsible for the care provided at nurseries were only expected to have health education. The experts presumed that collective play skills only began to develop in children at the age of three, so education was regarded as only effective for children from that age, while for younger children the most important thing considered was to develop a strong bond with the primary carer (Langmeier, 1983; Langmeier and Matějček, 1974 [1963]):

Toddlers, i.e. children of nursery age, do not create a play group … They spontaneously prefer ‘parallel play’ (each child plays alone). For children of this age—for their needs and their identity formation process—it is still the most important to be part of their primary small social group, i.e. the family. … in a larger group of children, their individual needs cannot be fulfilled immediately and unexceptionally. … The situation of children in a kindergarten is very different. … In kindergarten age, children are able to start a collective play alone … Children of kindergarten age already need contact with other children. A group of children in a kindergarten fulfills this need and extends children’s possibilities of social communication and social learning. (Matějček and Břicháček, 1989: 71)

Based on studies that focused mainly on children from children’s homes and week-long nurseries, the preferred view was that children should remain at home with their mother until the age of three, at which time, according to Czech developmental psychologists, a child first starts to profit from contact with peers. Even today, the experts quoted above are the most frequently cited experts on this issue in the Czech Republic (Saxonberg et al., 2012). This is apparent not only from the statements of psychologists
who comment publicly on the issue today but also from the statements of post-1989 political representatives and conservative civic organisations, who, moreover, discursively construe nurseries as a ‘communist collectivist invention depriving parents of their influence on their children’ (Saxonberg et al., 2012). The above shows how very different ideas about the psychological effects of collective care for children were developed by experts in France and the Czech Republic. In France, the opinion that ultimately came to be regarded as substantiated by science was that non-parental care does not psychologically harm children; on the contrary, it is cognitively enriching and helps to reduce social inequality. There were of course multiple and contradictory discourses within expert fields, but the frame stressing the desirability of early socialisation and education became the dominant one, even in reports submitted to different government authorities. Conversely, in Czechoslovakia/the Czech Republic, the prevailing view, which established itself as scientific opinion, was that children in collective institutions suffer emotional deprivation and poor development and that children should remain until the age of three at home with their mother.

These two different frames played a key role in the debates and had a hand in shaping care institutions for small children in both countries. In Czechoslovakia, psychologists and paediatricians together with economic experts active in the State Population Commission formulated a complex programme of ‘additional maternity leave’ and homecare allowance in the 1960s, which was then gradually introduced. In France, at the initiative of experts who wrote reports for government bodies, regulations pertaining to nurseries were amended in 1975 and formal collective care was given stronger financial support since then.

The question remains why in the Czech Republic, the issue was monopolised by conservatively oriented (clinical) psychologists and paediatricians, while in France the discursive space was largely dominated by psychologists and pedagogues who were more open to feminist ideas. The situation in former Czechoslovakia resulted from the fact that Stalin’s death was followed in the 1960s by a period of political reform. Experts were not only allowed to continue their research activities (often interrupted during the 1950s), but they were even asked to enter into the public and political debates (Wolchik, 1983). Many of them came from a conservative background, and in their fieldwork, they saw the negative impact of the communist ideas (Saxonberg et al., 2012). Their discourse then developed in reaction to and in contrast to the previously dominant communist ideology (Padamsee, 2009: 430). They can be defined as what Mahoney and Thelen (2010) call ‘subversives’, who ‘bide their time, waiting for the moment when they can actively move toward a stance of opposition’.

Moreover, these experts themselves and their opinions found a fertile ground among the public in the 1960s. The experts’ calling for more time for mothers to care for their children resonated well with the deeply rooted gender-conservative ideology which persisted and even strengthened in the country during the state socialist regime since the 1960s (Havelková, 2014). In the 1960s, economists accused mothers’ participation in paid employment of being ineffective, psychologists censured women for ‘children’s deprivation’ caused by collective care, and demographers raised the alarm about the ‘population crisis’ (Havelková, 2014). The previous period, that is, the 1950s, was looked down upon as being too coercive with the principle of equality of sexes.
Radvanová, a female legal scholar, specialising in the position of women, criticised the previous ‘equalization’ period of the 1950s as being too directive with the principle of equality when it ‘coerced young mothers into a hasty return to their job’ (Radvanová, 1969: 509 in Havelková, 2014). While the 1950s saw a state’s push for women’s participation in paid employment, the late 1960s and mainly the 1970s saw the introduction of many gender-specific pro-maternity provisions in the area of labour law and social policy which targeted women and cemented their role as mothers and homemakers (Havelková, 2014).

In Czechoslovakia (and later in the Czech Republic), political situation played a decisive role in when, on which topics, and what experts were allowed to speak. Moreover, the gender-conservative ideology (which persisted in the post-communist countries more than elsewhere in Europe) gave credence to such framings that were in line with such ideology. While the feminist movement could not exist in Czechoslovakia under the state socialist regime and the support for separate gender roles has even increased under the regime since the late 1960s, in France, the women’s movement has had some influence on all stakeholders since the 1960s. In the French case, the same persons were often acting as experts and as activists simultaneously. This can be illustrated by the figure of Evelyne Sullerot, a professor who was not only active in several feminist and socialist groups and associations but also taught at universities and acted as expert at the European Economic Community and on the national level, at the Conseil économique, social et environnemental (Economic, Social, and Environmental Council of the Government).

The above-mentioned text shows that the expert framings were not independent of the wider context—the political and interest groups’ framings and gender ideologies included. Indeed, they often bridged and aligned.

**The ‘equality of men and women’ frame**

In both countries, childcare mainly entered the political agenda in connection with the mass entry of women into the labour market. The second wave of feminist movement and its framing played a key role in France in promoting what type of care for children under the age of three should be supported by the state. Since the 1970s, the issue of equality of men and women has become the dominant framing in the debates on women’s paid employment and childcare. In 1974, the first important institution defending the interests of women was the state Secretariat for Women’s Issues (Sécretariat à la condition féminine), which was later elevated to the level of an independent ministry (Laroque, 1985). Although it focused on equality in the labour market (Revillard, 2007), its representatives also influenced childcare policy.

Care for children under the age of three was constructed in the 1970s as an issue that needed to be solved in order to promote equality of men and women in the public sphere. It has been repeatedly pointed out in expert and popular publications that the interests of the child and the interests of his or her mother are not in conflict, as the interests of the child can only be met by a psychologically balanced and content mother (De Singly, 2000). The pedagogical-psychological and feminist framings aligned in France and led to stronger support for formal childcare in the second half of the 1970s. The pro-natalist discourse at that moment also supported this policy solution: ‘… the
Socialists, when in power, fashioned pronatalist policies to accommodate certain feminist goals’ (King, 1998: 48).

Conversely, in Czechoslovakia/the Czech Republic, the feminist framing did not evolve because no feminist movement existed in the state socialist period and the influence of feminist organisations after 1989 remained weak (Hašková, 2005; Heitlinger, 1996). The dominant psychological-paediatric framing of care for children under the age of three reinforced the idea that the interests of children and the economic activity of women are in conflict (Langmeier, 1983; Langmeier and Matějček, 1974 [1963]).

In Czechoslovakia, in the 1950s, nurseries were promoted by communist women’s committees in order to emancipate women through employment. In the 1960s, when the only official women’s organisation, the Czech Women’s Union (Český svaz žen, ČSŽ), was established at the suggestion of the Communist Party, the Union’s representatives mainly took into account the heavy burden that was being placed on mothers in full-time employment and supported the introduction of three-year paid maternity leave (Čákiová, 2005). Their support for long childcare leave for mothers resonated well with the belief in the nature of separate gender roles in the society, which has much wider support among post-communist European populations than elsewhere in Europe even today (Hašková and Saxonberg, 2016). Given the absence of a feminist movement during the state socialist period, still weak influence of the post-1989 feminist organisations, and the alignment of the framing of nurseries as a ‘communist invention’ and the ‘young children should be at home with their mother’ frame, feminists have yet to challenge the dominant psychological-paediatric framing, which is in line with gender-conservative ideology (Saxonberg et al., 2012).

The ‘choice’ frame

In the mid-1980s in France, the ‘choice’ frame partly replaced the ‘equality of men and women’ frame (Martin, 2010). ‘Choice’ arguments were initially put forward by some of the pedagogical-psychological experts. According to Soulé (1972), different children have different needs, and the mental wellbeing of a child also depends on the parents’ being satisfied with their choice of care. Therefore, it was necessary for everyone to have a range of childcare options. Moreover, some feminists argued for the diversification of social policies and childcare institutions to fit all possible types of families (Sullerot, 1981).

However, ‘choice’ frame ultimately translated into an economic argument for less state intervention in the era dominated by neoliberalism, which in turn meant less state support for institutions and abandoning the emphasis on the quality of care provided (Daune-Richard, 1999: 42). This economic framing of childcare characterised the second formative moment in the development of childcare institutions in France. An economic crisis gripped France in 1982. The ‘free choice’ frame was employed to promote support for alternative forms of care, that is, maternity assistants, nannies, micro-nurseries, parents’ nurseries, and benefits for mothers caring for their children at home. Seconded by nationalist-driven, family-conservative, pro-natalist arguments (King, 1998), it ultimately facilitated a shift away from support for collective institutions towards other
forms of care, the ones regarded as cheaper and at the same time instrumental in reducing unemployment (Fagnani and Rassat, 1997: 4; Martin, 2010; Math and Renaudat, 1997).

The economic framing also played an important role in Czech society. Like in France, its emergence contributed to a formative moment in the development of childcare institutions. During the 1960s, the Czech economy was confronted with serious problems and low work productivity. In the 1960s, when there was no longer a shortage of labour in the feminised sectors of the economy, the Czechoslovak National Assembly decided to extend maternity leave so that mothers could choose to stay at home longer (Hašková et al., 2009). It was assumed that despite the expected decline in women’s employment this measure would bring, it would benefit Czechoslovakia both demographically and economically because mothers would be less burdened and thus would opt to have more children, children would be healthier, the demand on costly nurseries would be lower, and mothers’ sudden absences at their workplace due to the sickness of their children would also be lower (Hašková et al., 2009). The psychological-paediatric frame ‘young children should be at home with their mother’ fit the economic frame in the sense that both provided discursive support for the introduction of ‘additional maternity leave’.

The 1960s was a period of severe economic troubles and demographic decline, which nurtured the discursive struggles over childcare. The Nová soustava řízení (New System of Management—a newly introduced programme for the economy and administration) brought a more liberal programme for the economy and society which supplied a narrative of choice (Havelková, 2014). The ‘choice’ narrative was then used in support for longer maternity leave and against the ‘equalisation’ period of the 1950s (Havelková, 2014). The political crisis in 1968 was then decisive for the implementation of the pro-population plan to introduce 3-year paid maternity leave. This plan from the 1960s was realised since the very beginning of the 1970s and throughout the 1980s in the period of ‘normalisation’, in which the political elites introduced policies that led people to focus on their private lives rather than the public sphere. The introduction of 3 years of paid maternity leave had a fundamental influence on the direction of national childcare policy even after 1989 (Havelková, 2014).

In the 1990s, the Czech government used the rhetoric of the ‘free choice of mothers not to work in paid employment’, supposedly not available to them under the state socialist regime (Saxonberg et al., 2012). Similar to the period of ‘normalisation’, the post-1989 governments used the ‘free choice’ frame to extend further the allowance paid to a parent caring full-time for a child. In addition, they abolished subsidies for nurseries in the hope of cutting public expenditures and lowering the number of the unemployed (Saxonberg et al., 2012).

The ‘free choice’ frame even entered the post-1989 debate on fertility decline in Czech society. Although the country experienced the lowest total fertility rate ever in the 1990s—1.2 children per woman, the pro-natalist framing of childcare has not been reactivated in the country. The post-1989 drop in fertility was framed by ‘free choice’ of people to postpone childbearing in order to have time to invest in the career and leisure activities their parents were not allowed to (Rabušic, 2001).

In the last decade, the rhetoric of free choice has been used as an argument to oppose any kind of investment into nurseries—necessarily used by some parents only (Saxonberg et al., 2012). The framing used by psychologists and paediatricians claiming that formal
Care is harmful to children under three has aligned with the economic frame and translated into the further abolishing of nurseries in 2012 (Saxonberg et al., 2012).

Thus, in both countries, the economic framing of childcare, which highlights the costs of day care, emerged at the time of economic crisis. The crisis contributed to the activation of specific actors (economists, (more) right-oriented politicians) that strengthened the economic discourse of the childcare. The economic frame aligned with the dominant early-childhood experts’ frames: In France, it was the ‘diversity of institutions for children with diverse needs’ frame put forward by pedagogical-psychological experts. In Czech society, it was the ‘children under the age of three should stay with their mother’ frame put forward by psychologists and paediatricians. The alignment of the economic frame and the early-childhood experts’ frames led to the dominance of a specific definition of the situation and possible solutions. In both countries, this new framing accompanied a change in the direction of the development of institutions. While in France there was a shift towards diversifying the forms of childcare supported, in Czechoslovakia extended paid maternity leave was introduced, and gradually it became the norm for women to interrupt their careers for several years after having a child.

Conclusion

Our analysis builds on the premise that a critical juncture or formative moment involves a ‘crisis’, an ideational change, and subsequent policy change. In the studied cases, political, economic, and demographic ‘crises’ preceded the institutional change. The ideational change, however, determined the direction of the change of institutions. And the discursive struggles that preceded the ideational change were decisive in determining whether the ideational change occurs or not. The only exception was the late 1940s/early 1950s in Czechoslovakia, when important legislative changes occurred without being properly discussed, just to follow the Soviet model.

In order to understand the differences in current childcare policies and institutions in the Czech Republic and France, we applied framing analysis. It allowed us to understand the processes of the formation of ideas and discursive struggles preceding the policy changes that explain their current differences. Specifically, we discussed the role of expert discourse in the process of institutional change.

The analysis showed that expert knowledge and how it has been presented in public discourse have had a fundamental impact on the formation of childcare policies and institutions in the two countries. Knowledge, thus, proved to have a direct relationship with political power.

However, there is an arbitrary quality to the substance of expert knowledge. In France, the dominating ‘regime of truth’ differs from that in the Czech Republic. The type of expertise and specialisations that enter into the discourse are crucial for the framing of an issue. While in France more emphasis has traditionally been placed on empirical knowledge, in Czechoslovakia/the Czech Republic clinical experience or the observation of children placed in permanent institutions was the main source of expert knowledge. While in France pedagogues joined the discussion alongside psychologists, in Czechoslovakia/the Czech Republic no consideration was given to the need for pedagogical input for children under the age of three. Instead, the accent on health and hygiene in nurseries prevailed.
Expert discourse in France and the Czech Republic was instrumental in determining what kind of care was regarded as ‘good’ care in a given context. Moreover, in the history of both countries, it had a fundamental impact on the formation of care institutions—either through experts’ direct participation in the design of policies or through the use of their arguments by political actors in concrete situations.

However, expert discourse is not powerful enough to determine the shape of institutions on its own. Other factors enter into play, in particular the economic situation and the economic framing connected to it. In the case of the two countries, the economic framing stressed high costs of childcare institutions in the times of economic crises, and it was used to support institutional changes supposedly providing a cheaper solution to the provision of care for babies while, in reality, being a reaction to the problems in the labour market. An important role was also played by political actors and political situation, in general.

Moreover, women’s movements and organisations introducing their own framings of the issue played an important role. In France, the ‘equality of men and women’ frame aligned with the ‘babies need socialisation’ frame of early-childhood experts and then the ‘diversity of institutions for children with diverse needs’ frame. It also resonated well with the opinions and experiences of the population. In Czechoslovakia, the promotion of the nurseries in the 1950s was perceived by the majority of the population as coming from the Soviets. When the ‘experts from science’ came with an opposing frame that ‘young children should be at home with their mother’ in the 1960s, it was accepted not only by economists and politicians. It resonated well with overburdened mothers too. The widespread belief in separate gender roles and the underlying gender-conservative ideology gave credence to such framing. In the last decade, the ‘equality of men and women’ frame has been used with a new impetus by newly established women’s organisations in the Czech Republic. However, it competes with older powerful frames that aligned with each other—the frame on ‘free choice of mothers not to work in paid employment’, re-adopted after 1989 as a reaction to the pre-1989 ‘duty to be employed’ (although the legal duty never applied to mothers in Czechoslovakia), and the frame stating that ‘young children should be at home with their mother’, promoted by early-childhood psychologists in the country.

In this article, we focused on showing how frame alignments contribute to explaining policy change. In both countries, it is possible to find contradicting frames too. Emergent and residual frames that have not found alignments (yet) have not led to an ideational and then policy change. For example, Czech feminists quote recent international studies on early-childhood education and care promoted by the European Commission to define preschool education and care as a condition for gender equality, social cohesion, and economic sustainability and to argue for the need of education even for infants and toddlers. The related frames compete with the above-mentioned dominating frames that have blocked another formative moment to occur in the realm of childcare policies in the Czech Republic (so far).

The demographic situation and especially the pro-natalist framing connected to it also contributed to shaping childcare policies and institutions in both of the studied countries. The pro-natalist frame has been activated in conjunction with other frames in order to increase the salience of the problems and their policy solutions defined within the other
frames. In France, it not only supported the introduction of parental allowance, but it also supported the different forms of non-parental (including formal) childcare after the fertility declined in the 1970s. In Czechoslovakia, the pro-natalist framing supported the introduction of paid ‘additional maternity leave’ when fertility declined in the 1960s. Since fertility increased in the 1970s after the introduction of two-year paid maternity leave (among other pro-family measures), it was then used as an argument for further prolongation of paid maternity leave up to three years. Interestingly, the pro-natalist frame was not re-activated in the Czech Republic during the 1990s when the country experienced the lowest total fertility rate ever. This shows that although the objective situation plays a role in (re)shaping policies and institutions, the framing of the situation in the discourse may be even more important for directing policies and institutions.

Institutionalists were for long successful in explaining institutional stability but not change. The discursive institutionalist approach then showed a way how to explain institutional change by the means of examining changes in ideas among actors. So far, little attention was given to exploring the ways in which discursive institutionalist approach may contribute to explaining differences in the development of childcare policies among countries.

Taking the example of the Czech Republic/Czechoslovakia and France, we argue that framing analysis provides a dynamic approach to a nuanced understanding of the development of (childcare) policies and institutions. It allows for international comparative analyses and studying institutional change by means of examining discursive struggles that preceded a major policy change.

Expert knowledge plays an important role in the complex societies we live in. Analysing experts’ framings proved to be crucial for understanding the establishment of the two different regimes of truth on childcare in the Czech Republic and France. Experts’ framings and their success in influencing the institutional changes are themselves shaped by socio-political situation and the connected framings, deeply rooted gender ideologies, and interest groups. We have shown that identifying the relationships between the different frames helps explaining their success in influencing the institutional change. Therefore, we suggest identification of frame alignments along with frame resonance with ‘the larger belief system’ to be an important analytical step when explaining the direction of institutional change and the differences in the development of childcare institutions and policies among individual countries.

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