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The relationship between family and employment and the well-being of children

The reconciliation of family and employment is currently a popular theme in social sciences. It is mainly used in order to discuss how a coherent relationship between the responsibility of parents for childcare and the employment system could be developed and why this relationship is often incoherent in many European countries. The main focus of the debate is on problems of gender inequality and limitations for women to participate in the labour market. Much less emphasis is placed on the question what this means from the perspective of children and the well-being of children.

It is argued here that the concept of “reconciliation” is not an adequate academic concept to analyse the relationship between family and the employment system and the tensions and contradictions that might develop. Also, it is not an adequate concept to analyse the situation of children in this context. Moreover, the way it is used does not adequately take into account that what people perceive as an adequate relationship of family and employment and a good life situation of children, because of cultural differences, in part differs in a comparative perspective between societies.

It is suggested here to use instead a broader approach of the “arrangement of work and family” which is based on historical institutionalism. This approach conceptualises the ways in which the situation of mothers, fathers and children develops in the context of the specific institutional constellation and cultural context of family, employment system and social policies in a society and offers a theoretical framework for cross-national comparative analyses.

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