

How Grandmothers Become “Second Moms” *Family Policies and Grandmothering in Britain, Germany and Sweden*

This article analyzes how British, German and Swedish family policies, especially leave programs and access to publicly subsidized childcare services, influence the involvement of grandmothers in the care of preschool-age children. This study, which seeks to extend feminist analyses of the welfare state and sociological studies on working families, draws on in-depth interviews with one hundred parents conducted in London, “Stromfels,” Germany, and Stockholm from 1999 to 2001. First, this article discusses the main differences in family policies in Britain, Germany and Sweden. Second, it shows that grandmothers provide a substantial amount of childcare in working class families in London and Stromfels, but not in Stockholm. Third, this article shows that especially in London, “second moms” fill parents’ need for affordable, trustworthy childcare after mothers return to work. “Second moms” also provide a financial and emotional safety net for their daughters and their grandchildren. Fourth, this article discusses how British and to a lesser extent German family policies increase the demand for “second moms” compared to Swedish family policies, which reduce the demand for and supply of childcare by “second moms.” I conclude by suggesting that different kinds of family policies, in combination with economic and cultural forces, may produce different kinds of families.

This article explores how family policies affect the decision of employed parents in Britain, Germany and Sweden to involve grandmothers in the care of children younger than seven years. The term “family policies” here refers to government-sponsored family policies such as maternity and parental leave, the provision of publicly subsidized childcare services, and tax deductions or cash benefits for children and childcare. The primary goal of this article is to analyze how different kinds of family policies in interplay with cultural and economic forces influence the extent to which grandmothers are substantially

involved in children's care. It also highlights the large amount of care work¹ that grandmothers in countries such as Britain and Germany undertake and shows that in Sweden, grandmothers are also involved in caring for young children, but not to the large extent as grandmothers in Britain and Germany.

Previous research has shown that low-income families in Britain and Germany rely on childcare by relatives and friends more so than families with higher incomes (Brannen and Moss, 1991; Rerrich, 1996; Spiess, Büchel & Frick, 2002; Ward, Dale & Joshi, 1996). For instance, Julia Brannen and Peter Moss (1991), who studied dual-earner couples with children in London in the mid 1980s, discovered that working class families relied on kin networks for childcare to a large extent because of their lack of financial resources and the closer-knit network structures of working class families.

Similarly, Maria Rerrich's (1996) study found that working class Bavarian families with preschoolers and children in primary school largely relied on unpaid childcare by extended kin. By contrast, middle class families paid for childcare and support services provided by working class women, immigrant women, or women who were not German citizens. Katharina Spiess, Felix Büchel and Joachim Frick (2002) found that in West Germany in 2000, 31.6 percent of children younger than three years were cared for by relatives other than parents on a regular basis, and 36 percent of children aged three to six years were in the regular care of relatives.

At the outset of the larger research project of which this article is a part, I drew on the research cited above to hypothesize that the childcare choices parents make and their experiences with their care arrangements would vary considerably by social class. Social class is measured here by household income, occupation, and education level. I further expected parents' choices and experiences to differ by country, given the differences between British, German and Swedish family policies. This expectation was grounded in the literature on welfare regimes² by Gøsta Esping-Andersen (1990, 1999), and above all, in the feminist analyses of welfare states by Jane Jenson (1997), Jane Lewis (1992, 1993), Ann Orloff (1993), Ilona Ostner (1993, 1994, 2003), and Diane Sainsbury (1994, 1999). However, these analyses, which focus on the gendered aspects of welfare regimes, do not examine their impact on people's everyday lives.³ This study seeks to fill this gap in the literature on welfare regimes by studying how welfare regimes relate to grandmothers' everyday lives.⁴

First, I discuss the research methods employed in this study. Second, I highlight the main differences between British, German and Swedish family policies. Third, I describe the extent of grandmothers' care involvement in my sample, and parents' views on why they decided to involve grandmothers in the care of preschool-age children. Finally, I will discuss how family policies influence parents' decisions to rely on grandmothers as childcare providers. I will tease out how British and German, but not Swedish, family policies help produce families in which grandmothers act as caregivers for children between two and five entire days per week.

Research methods

This article draws on one hundred, in-depth semi-structured interviews I conducted with parents in London, Stockholm, and Stromfels, a city of circa 200,000 inhabitants in Germany's *Land* of Baden-Württemberg between November 1999 and March 2001.⁵ I conducted these interviews with the goal of learning about parents' views on family policies and their experiences with childcare arrangements. I decided on a cross-country comparison, as a comparative approach allowed me to tease out the role that different policy contexts play in parents' childcare choices. I chose Britain, Germany and Sweden as the cases for my study, as these countries represent different types of welfare regimes.

I conducted research in London, Stromfels and Stockholm mostly for practical reasons. In each research site, I located respondents in teaching and research hospitals. I recruited interviewees from different social class backgrounds because I wanted to investigate how family policies affect parents with different education levels, occupations, and incomes. Table 1 presents key information about the demographic characteristics of my samples.

Family policies

Since it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss British, German and Swedish family policy in detail, I will focus on the policy differences that most influence parents' decisions to choose grandmothers as their grandchildren's caregivers. The policies that matter most are leave policies and the provision of publicly-funded childcare services (family childcare and daycare) for children younger than three years. In short, in comparison to Swedish and German family policies, British family policies are the least generous in terms of the duration and benefits of maternity and parental leave, and the provision of publicly subsidized childcare services for preschoolers. The British leave program is the shortest (three months) and least generous, while Germany provides the longest leave (three years), but the leave program is not as generous as the Swedish one: in Sweden in 2000, parents were entitled to a leave of 18 months, 15 months of which were paid at 80 percent of the income of the parent on leave (up to a certain income threshold) (Försäkringskassan, 2000).

With regard to publicly-subsidized and thus inexpensive childcare services, the German state's involvement in the provision of childcare services for children younger than three years is similarly low as in Britain. In (West) Germany in 2000, 3.6 percent of children younger than three years, and 77 percent of children aged three years to compulsory school age were in publicly funded daycare (Spiess *et al.*, 2002). In Britain, the percentages were 2 percent for (1993) and 58 percent (for 2000) respectively (Department for Employment and Education, 2000; European Commission, 1995). In Sweden in 1994, 33 percent of children aged 0 to three years and 78 percent of the older age group were in publicly funded daycare (Skolverket, 1998).

Most significantly, the short leave period in Britain relative to Germany

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of study samples			
Variable	London	Stockholm	Stromfels
Working Class Backgrounds	37%	36%	52%
Two parent households	88.8%	76%	81.5%
Single parent households	11.1%	24%	18.5%
Households with child under seven years ¹	100%	96%	96.2%
Average number of children per family	1.7	2.0	1.7
Average age of children (months) ²	31	47	49
Racial group: White	82%	97.2%	96%
Racial group: Black	9%	2.8%	4%
Racial group: Other	9%	0%	0%
Gender of interviewee	71%	75%	61%
Mothers active in formal labor market employment	81%	96%	85%
Mothers employed part-time ³	59%	46%	74%
Average part-time hours worked by mothers	20	30	18
Total number of households:	27	25	27
<p>¹Except for two families, all the parents I interviewed had a child younger than seven years at the time of the interview. The two exceptions were one single mother in Stromfels who had an eight year-old child, and one single mother in Stockholm whose youngest child was seven years old.</p> <p>²These figures only include children who were younger than seven years-old.</p> <p>³Part-time employment is defined as less than 35 hours per week.</p>			

and Sweden, combined with a relative lack of publicly subsidized childcare services for children younger than three years means that employed mothers in Britain face the widest gap with regard to childcare once they return to work. The same holds true for those mothers in Germany who return to work before their leave period ends and who cannot afford to or do not want to hire family childcare providers, au pairs or nannies. In Sweden, employed mothers do not face such childcare gaps because of the long paid leave period and easily accessible, inexpensive daycare or family childcare.

Second mom families

In London and Stromfels, grandmothers provided a significant amount of childcare after children ceased being in parents' full-time care, which typically happened once their leave period had ended. This was not the case in Stockholm. In Sweden, grandmothers took care of children when parents went out, when daycare centers were closed for holidays, or when parents wanted their children to be picked up from daycare earlier so they did not have to spend the entire day there.

In the following, I will describe the families in which grandmothers undertake childcare for more than two (12 hour) days per week on a regular basis. I will henceforth refer to these grandmothers as “second moms.” In seven out of the 27 London households (26 percent) and four out of the 27 Stromfels households (15 percent), second moms were children's exclusive caregivers while a parent or parents' were at work.

On the one hand, I call these grandmothers second moms, because many parents in London and Stromfels used this term to refer to grandmothers who provided such a significant amount of childcare. The numeral “second” also connotes that these women become mothers more than once during their lives, at a time when other women and men are full-time retirees, still employed, or full-time homemakers. The term “second mom” does not refer to those grandmothers who provided temporary childcare support, for instance when daycare centers were closed for holidays, when children got sick and needed to stay home from daycare, when care providers got sick, or when parents went out in the evenings or on weekends. It also does not include grandmothers who were part of a patchwork of different caregivers (see Thorne, 1999) in which grandmothers cared for children less than 24 hours per week.⁶

In the following, I mainly focus on the gender and class dynamics of second mom families because they are crucial to understanding how grandmothers become second moms. It is important to write about families rather than individuals to stress that this is a family formation different from nuclear families, families headed by solo mothers, or extended families in which grandmothers are not necessarily involved in childcare to such a substantial degree. I also want to emphasize that this is a family type that exists in Britain and Germany, whereas it is virtually nonexistent in Sweden, for reasons I will discuss later.

As indicated by the above-mentioned previous research, the class dynamics of the overall childcare involvement of grandmothers in the sample, including second moms, are striking. The working class children in the London and Stromfels samples were mostly cared for by grandmothers or other relatives after they stopped being in full-time parental care, when parents returned to work or training/education after their leave period was over. Specifically, 62 percent of working class children in the London sample and 31 percent of children in the Stromfels sample were in the primary or secondary care of their grandmothers. For the purposes of this paper, a child's primary care giver is defined as spending more than 42 hours per week caring for a child. No children in the Stockholm sample were in the care of grandmothers at all after their parents ceased being their full time caregivers. Like their middle class counterparts, working class children in Stockholm were typically cared for by teachers in publicly-subsidized daycare centers. Only eight percent of London middle class children and no middle class children in Stromfels were in the care of grandmothers after children's parents ceased being their full time care givers.

In London and Stromfels, grandmothers usually became "second moms" as soon as mothers resumed training or returned to work after their leave was over. On average, grandmothers first turned into second moms when children were five months old in London, and eight months old in Stromfels. As soon as these children entered publicly subsidized daycare, Kindergarten (Germany) or nursery school (Britain) around the age of three years, the hours that grandmothers cared for their grandchildren considerably decreased. In other words, second moms typically cared for children younger than three years old. They provided care for time periods covering from six months of up to 38 months.

Most of the parents who relied on childcare by second moms were dual-earner couples: five out of seven London and three out of four Stromfels households had two earners. With the exception of one middle class family in London, all second mom families were working class families. In London, five second mom families described themselves as "white British" or "white English," one family as "white Irish" and one family as "Afro-Caribbean." Three Stromfels second mom families described themselves as "German" and one family as "Turkish." In second mom families, mothers and grandmothers were children's primary care givers, while fathers and grandfathers were children's secondary caregivers. Most second moms (90 percent) were maternal grandmothers. Most of them were able to take on childcare responsibilities because they were not employed and in good health, and lived within driving distance from the child's home, or shared a home with the child. Only one second mom in the London sample was still employed, and she scheduled her work hours so she could care for her granddaughter while her daughter was at work. Typically, second moms only took care of one grandchild at a time. In most second mom families, grandmothers cared for their grandchildren during the day, and

children spend nights and weekends at their parents. However, in one Stromfels and two London families, children spent weekdays and weeknights at their grandmothers' or grandparents' home, because the distance between parents' and grandmothers' residences was too long for parents to cover on a daily basis. In one working class and one middle class family in London, mothers lived in their parents' homes with their children. One of these mothers had separated from her child's father, and the other child's father was away at university in another part of the country.

In summary, in my sample, the extensive and regular childcare involvement of second moms typically occurred among working class families in Britain and Germany with a child younger than three years, but not in Sweden. In Stockholm, grandparents also cared for children, but not to the same extent as grandmothers in London.

How grandmothers become second moms

Why is it that so many working class parents in London and Stromfels relied on grandmothers for childcare to such a large extent? In the following, I discuss how two families in London chose their childcare to demonstrate that parents in London and Stromfels involved second moms for material and emotional reasons. Parents in Stromfels listed similar reasons as parents in London when asked why they had chosen grandmothers as caregivers. First, many parents reported that they opted for second moms for financial reasons.⁷ Other parents said that they did not trust other types of caregivers. Parents also mentioned the non-availability of daycare that covered their work and commuting hours, and the lack of access to affordable quality daycare or a daycare spot of their choice as reasons for deciding to involve second moms. A few parents reported that they chose grandmothers as caregivers because they believed that infants needed "maternal" interactions in a home setting in the absence of their mothers.

The following examples indicate that in second-mom families, grandmothers filled parents' need for affordable, trustworthy and flexible childcare after mothers returned to work. In addition, grandmothers also provided a financial and emotional safety net for their daughters and their children. The first family I will discuss below is Muriel's.⁸

Muriel, an Afro-Caribbean mother of two children, worked full time as a medical assistant at Fairfield Hospital in London. Muriel was married to Daniel, a construction worker. They had an eight year-old daughter called Elizabeth and a two year-old son, James. When I interviewed Muriel, she told me that James spent the entire week at her mother Corinne's house. Corinne lived a thirty minute-drive away from Muriel and Daniel's home. Muriel left James at Corinne's on Sunday evenings and picked him up on Friday afternoons. Muriel described Corinne's care giving role in the following way: "she's like a second mom to James as well as a grandma." When I asked Muriel why she had involved her mother, Muriel responded:

[There is a private nursery nearby], and I inquired how much it would be to put my baby there, and I found out that it was very expensive, so that was, would take quite a chunk out of my salary, including my, my other expensive, expenses, and that would have been not worth coming back to work for.

Muriel also reported that her trust in Corinne had played an important role in her decision. When I inquired with Muriel whether a family childcare provider—called “child minder” in Britain—would have been a care option for her, Muriel said: “No, I didn’t want to give my child to a child minder. I think I prefer my child to be with other children- if I was going to put them in a nursery situation- I’d rather them be with other children, but I trust my mom, and I know he’s, he’s being looked after, you know, very well.”

Every other day, Muriel took Elizabeth over to Corinne’s to visit James and Corinne. Muriel told me that James would stop staying over at Corinne’s as soon as he started nursery school at the age of three and a half years. Since nursery school, which is free, only runs in the mornings, Muriel’s plan was to then pay private daycare center staff to pick up James from nursery school and care for him in the afternoons.

Similarly to Muriel, several of my London but not my Stromfels interviewees noted that they trusted grandmothers with the care of infants and toddlers, while they did not trust family childcare providers, the alternative type of caregivers they could have afforded. For instance, Julie, a white mother of a one year-old son called Joey, who worked part time as a receptionist at Stillgrounds Hospital, hinted at why she only trusted her parents to take care of Joey:

My mom and dad look after him, which is very handy. Otherwise I wouldn’t have gone back to work. If I’d had to leave him with somebody else, I wouldn’t have come back to work. Because I, you hear so many horror stories now, and I’m lucky that I’ve got a choice.

These findings corroborate research by Jane Wheelock and Katharine Jones (2002) on informal care for working parents in urban Britain. Wheelock and Jones’ study found that parents mentioned trust as the most frequently mentioned benefit of childcare by grandparents. In general, the parents in my London sample were much more fearful of child abuse by caregivers outside the family than parents in Stromfels and Stockholm, who placed great trust in family childcare providers⁹ and daycare center staff. My study found that the British media and government regulations that highlighted the abusive potential of individual caregivers that were not registered with local government authorities instilled a sense of fear of abusive care providers in parents. In addition, children in London were younger when they ceased being in full time parental care. Since parents considered infants more vulnerable than older children, this may also account for parents’ heightened sense of fear of abusive

care providers. The mothers in the London sample returned to work much earlier than mothers in Germany or Sweden.¹⁰ Accordingly, the children in London remained in full time parental care the shortest—six months on average—while children in Stromfels were in parental full time care for 15 months, and children in Stockholm for 16 months. In all research sites, middle class children remained in parents’ full time primary care for about two months longer than working-class children.¹¹

Caroline and Mike were another London family who relied on childcare by a second mom. Caroline, a white woman in her early thirties, worked as a full-time research associate at Courtview Hospital in London. She was married to Mike, a white Welshman several years her junior who had just graduated from Warwick University. Caroline and Mike had a two year-old daughter called Eve. While Mike was at university, Caroline acted as the family’s main breadwinner. After Eve was born, Caroline had just started working at Courtview Hospital and was living with her parents in Kent for half a year before she moved into her own house a five minute-walk away from her parents’. Caroline returned to work three months after Eve’s birth and then her mother, Betty, became Eve’s main caregiver. When I inquired with Caroline why she had asked Betty to care for Eve, Caroline explained:

Well, I mean, if you [exhales], we couldn’t have afforded childcare anyway. But added to that, even if I could afford it, I don’t think I could have left a baby as young as she was with anybody else than my mother, really, because she was only twelve weeks old. [...] And the other consideration is that because I commute, it’s a very long day, and there aren’t very many nurseries that will take them so early in the morning, you know, it would be, I leave at, I would need to drop her off somewhere by half past seven at the very latest, and I wouldn’t be able to pick her up until six. And there aren’t many nurseries that would do a day that long. So that’s another problem.

In Caroline’s case, her birth family acted as a financial safety net that caught her and Eve when her and Mike’s household income was low. Caroline’s parents also acted as an emotional safety net at a time when Mike lived elsewhere most of the year.

These examples illustrated why parents decided to rely on second moms as care providers. They showed that financial and emotional reasons played a large role in parents’ decisions. Cultural reasons may also play a role insofar as it may be more culturally acceptable for working class families and Afro-Caribbean or Turkish families to involve grandmothers in childcare to a considerable extent.¹² In the following, I will discuss how British and German family policies may shape these decisions.

How family policies make second mom families

I argue that in Britain grandmothers turn into second moms because of the

short unpaid leave in combination with a lack of childcare services and a culture emphasizing the potentially abusive character of individual care providers outside the family. In Germany, where parental leave is longer than in the other two countries but not as generous as in Sweden, and where affordable publicly-funded daycare for children younger than three years is less easily accessible than in Sweden, employed parents of children younger than three years also rely on grandmothers as their children's care providers. Similarly to London, it was mostly lower-income parents in Stromfels who relied on childcare by grandmothers.

In Sweden, it is mothers and fathers on parental leave, and then mostly publicly subsidized and/or managed daycare that play the care giving role that second moms assume in working class families in Britain and Germany. I propose that Swedish family policies reduce the demand for and supply of childcare by second moms in several ways. First, the comparatively long and generous parental leave, the extensive provision of affordable quality daycare or family childcare that parents trust, and employed parents' entitlement to part-time employment, eliminate parents' need for second moms. Second, Swedish family policies also influence the supply side of second mom-childcare. Since Swedish family policies have encouraged women's labour market participation for over thirty years, grandmothers in Sweden may also be more likely to still participate in the labour market than grandmothers in Britain and Germany. Owing to previous family policies that encouraged women to stay home or work part-time and men to be breadwinners, today's grandmothers in Britain and Germany may have given up employment after their children were born and may therefore be more available to care for grandchildren today. This suggests that effects of family policy, labour market and retirement policy may also be long-term.

Conclusion

This study first highlighted that for employed parents in Sweden, the childcare gap between the end of parental leave and the start of primary school is narrowest, due to the availability of affordable quality childcare services. Employed parents in Britain face the widest family policy gap because the leave period is the shortest, and access to affordable childcare services very limited, especially for children younger than three years. Working class parents chose to involve grandmothers in childcare to a substantial degree for financial reasons and because they feared child abuse by care providers outside the family, especially in London. I suggested that the British family policy gap and a culture of fear of abusive care givers perpetuated by the media and government discourses on childcare were responsible for working class families relying on second moms for childcare to a considerable extent.

To conclude, this article showed that different family policies may produce different kinds of families. Family policies that leave childcare gaps such as British and German family policies may produce "second mom families." In

second mom families, grandmothers are involved in childcare to a large extent, and three generations interact on a regular basis. These findings substantiate and extend sociological studies on families in Europe and the U.S., especially the research on families by Karen V. Hansen (2001, 2002, 2005) and Christian Alt and Walter Bien (1994), which demonstrates that nuclear families are not really as nuclear as they may seem at first glance. The findings of this study also suggest that family policies indirectly function as pension policies in the sense that they influence the everyday lives of older women. Thus, this study also contributes to feminist analyses of welfare regimes, which have typically focused on maternal involvement in care work and employment, by highlighting the work of older women. Lastly, this article also suggests that the supply of many workers with childcare responsibilities is made possible by the care work of older women. Most of these women do not derive financial benefits from their work, even though they may receive emotional benefits or payments in kind.

This latter point reveals an obvious limitation of this study: it obfuscates the voices and experiences of grandmothers themselves, because the main aim of my research project was to explore how different family policies shape parents' experiences with their childcare. While this research suggests that different family policies shape the daily lives of grandmothers in different ways because of the ways in which states fund and organize the childcare of preschoolers, further research will need to show what this means to the lives of grandmothers themselves.

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¹By “care work” I understand the physical and emotional work involved in raising children.

²Esping-Andersen (1990, 1999) defined welfare regimes as the distribution of the production of welfare among the state, the family, and the market.

³Anne Gauthier (2000) has argued that the literature on family policies is limited in so far as it does not consider the “outcomes” of family policies.

⁴To date, there is only one cross-country study (Windebank, 1999, 2001) that explores the effects of social policies on employed parents from an in-depth

perspective. However, this research focuses on the consequences of family policies on the gendered division of household work and childrearing, not on how family policies affect parents' childcare choices and experiences with their childcare.

⁵In Stromfels, I interviewed 41 parents from 22 two-parent households and five single-mother households. In London, I carried out interviews with 31 parents from 24 couple households and three single-mother households. In Stockholm, I interviewed parents from 19 couple households and six single-mother households.

⁶These types of patchwork situations existed in five out of the 27 German and two out of the 27 British households in my sample.

⁷Ninety percent of these parents did not pay "second moms" in cash but in kind, for instance by giving them gifts, or by driving them to "the shops."

⁸The names of people and their workplaces have been changed to ensure respondents' confidentiality.

⁹Family childcare providers are defined as paid caregivers who take care of children in their own home.

¹⁰The figures look similar at the aggregate level. In 1996, 67 percent of British mothers who were employed during pregnancy returned to work within nine to eleven months after giving birth (Office of National Statistics, 1998).

¹¹For Britain, this finding also holds true at the aggregate level. In 1996, 67 percent of British mothers who were employed during pregnancy returned to work within nine to eleven months after giving birth (Office of National Statistics, 1998).

¹²For the U.S. context, Lynet Uttal (1999) has shown that African American and Mexican American families find it more acceptable than Anglo American families to rely on childcare by relatives.

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