Parents and the moral economies of childcare access in Germany: struggling for places and legitimate selves

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Abstract

Employing a moral economy perspective, this paper explores access to center-based childcare in Germany both in the majority sector of tax-funded centers and the niche of high-priced commercial providers. Drawing on parents’ narrations of their choice of childcare centers, it will be shown how access logics of each sector, policy and practice in various welfare state arenas, parents’ specific situations and ambitions, and local provision together constitute contexts that provide or deny moral authorization of parental claims to childcare places and specific identities. The shortage of publicly funded childcare, managed by selectively granting access, gives rise to moral struggles over the legitimacy of one’s own and others’ needs, ways of living, and ambitions; these struggles can be avoided by turning to the commercial sector. Consequently, in accessing publicly funded or commercial childcare, parents unequally gain access to resources to realize not only their practical ambitions but highly valued selves.
Parents and the moral economies of childcare access in Germany: struggling for places and legitimate selves

Center-based childcare in Germany is largely tax-funded, with centers almost exclusively operated by private nonprofit organizations or the state itself; only recently did a niche of private for-profit providers materialize. The welfare state’s central role in regulating and funding childcare means that there is a long-established set of principles and practices of center-based childcare, such as the principle of subsidiarity (preferring private over state provision), parents’ right to choose a center (according to their pedagogical and philosophical preferences), or criteria determining families’ eligibility to a place in publicly funded childcare. Recent years have brought substantial efforts to increase the childcare system’s capacity, driven by a mixture of rationales to reduce poverty, tap mothers’ labor potential and address educational inequalities early on (cf. Oliver and Mätzke 2014, 168–169).

It was against this background that in 2012 we interviewed parents in both state-funded nonprofit centers and high-priced commercial centers. We inquired about their choice of and access to their childcare center, among other topics. It was striking how parents talked of access to each type of center in markedly different ways. Their stories of contacting and accessing childcare centers convey complex negotiations of their social position and legitimacy of their need, and they normatively evaluated their experiences. The moral sentiments expressed by the parents are understood as pointing to particular moral economies that can broadly be defined as systems of evaluating and judging what is just and appropriate in the exchanges taking place in a certain social field.

This paper aims to complement studies that have explored childcare and preschool choices with a view toward parents’ morality and identity (Karlsson, Löfdahl, and Prieto 2013) and the interplay of parents’ commitments with ‘the structure of opportunities and constraints formed by state policy and material conditions’ (Stefansen and Farstad 2010, 137). As Karlsson, Löfdahl, and Prieto (2013) point out, the parents in their study connect, through their storytelling, to culturally available discourses that enable them to lay claim to the subject position of responsible parents. Stefansen and Farstad (2010), in their analysis of class-related care models, emphasize the significance of national and local contexts and childcare traditions for how parents translate their sentiments into practice.

In this article, I examine how parents make sense of processes of accessing center-based childcare, which are thoroughly shaped by childcare policy and the structure of local provision. Whether parents use state-funded or commercial facilities, in trying to access center-based care they inevitably make contact with German childcare policy and are, in diverse ways, positioned by it and position themselves in relation to it.
As the discourse of good parenthood plays a role, it is not only as parents that the interviewees are addressed as in this process. German childcare policy is embedded in a broader agenda of the welfare state; the parents are spoken to as, for example, (prospective) wage earners, gendered beings, and responsible citizens. The parents in this study must thus be understood to negotiate not only the practice and organization of their childrearing but their entitlement to a welfare service and the legitimacy of their (actual or aspired) way of life – e.g., career plans or the distribution of time between job and family. These issues will be explored from the parents’ perspective. Which structure of opportunities, shaped by the current welfare regime, presents itself to them, and which, in their opinion, should? How do the logics of access to the different childcare sectors, to be reconstructed from the interviews, work, and what compels parents to respond to them on moral grounds? What is it that makes the stories of commercial centers’ clients so different?

A lack of places has long been characteristic of the highly regulated German childcare system and prevailed when we conducted the interviews. The welfare state’s operationalization of need figures prominently in the administration of this shortage, as well as in parents’ accounts of access to publicly funded childcare services. Employing a moral economy perspective, the parents’ notions of the sensible and just distribution of a scarce good, the topics of who is legitimately in need of center-based care, and how parents perceive this to be a (mis-)recognition of their position and ambitions are central to this analysis.

As central features of state-organized childcare in Germany figure prominently in the interviews and analysis, these will be outlined first. The second section details the concept of moral economy as it is heuristically used in this article. The third and fourth sections detail the methodological basis of the analysis and the data-gathering and analytical procedures. The fifth section begins with the reconstruction of the logic and moral economy of the access to publicly funded childcare centers; moral sentiments emerge that are shared by all the study’s participants, although many parents notice contradictions and ambiguities. These result from parents being called upon differently in labor market and educational policy, discourses about parenthood, and popular imaginations of the individual self. This situation is then compared to a case in which the parents turned to one of the few high-priced commercial providers to outline the logic and moral implications of access to commercial childcare. Here, the parents were able to evade some of the moral struggles they encountered in the publicly funded sector, but were faced with a different set of constraints. The conclusion summarizes the findings.

Center-based childcare in Germany

Following the tradition of West Germany, center-based childcare in Germany is essentially state-funded, not-for-profit, and provided by private (i.e. non-state) organizations. Post-wwii center-based childcare in West Germany has thus always been privatized; in 2014, only one...
third of the roughly 53,500 childcare centers have been run by state institutions (Statistisches Bundesamt 2014, 17–18).

On the federal legislative and administrative level, early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Germany falls within the realm of children and youth welfare, not education; care and pre-compulsory education are nevertheless conceptually integrated in German childcare centers. The federal states set their own rules within the given framework, provide funds, and practice oversight. The actual determination of the demand and transfer of funds to providers takes place at the municipal level. Thus, the state plays a central role not only in public (state-run) but in state-funded private childcare.

For the states in which the research was conducted, the state funding of private, nonprofit childcare centers covers about 90% of the provider’s costs; the rest has to come from the provider’s own funds – e.g., from donations or other operations. The state charges parents an income-dependent (and far from cost-covering) fee for a place in a childcare center. High-cost, for-profit providers are proliferating but still make up only a tiny fraction of childcare provision. Waiving state subsidies or not being eligible for state funding at all, their operation is solely based on the fees they charge parents. Like the not-for-profit providers, these providers need an operating permit, which by law cannot be denied if certain prerequisites are met. However, because they do not receive state funding, they are not bound by associated regulations, such as limits on offering and individually charging for additional courses.

Since 1996, the state guarantees all children ages three and up a place in a publicly funded childcare center or with a certified childminder. With programs to extend ECEC capacity, this guarantee was extended in August 2013 (after the research took place) to children aged 1 year and older. This does not necessarily mean that families’ needs in terms of extent of care, opening hours, or convenient or accessible centers are met.

In view of the notorious scarcity of childcare places, which is especially prevalent in the western federal states, access has been prioritized by federal law. This means that single parents, working couples, parents currently engaged in education, and those from low-income households gain privileged access to places. In 2012, this provision applied to parents with children under 3 years of age (older children were guaranteed a place); providers often extend this selection to all age groups to rank applicants and complement the selection criteria according to their own philosophies.

Compulsory schooling starts with primary school around the age of six, thus kindergarten attendance is voluntary. As of March 2014, about 27% of children under the age of three (under 3s) and 93% of children ages three and up (over 3s) attended center-based care. The attendance of under 3s varies widely across the federal states from 16.7% in North Rhine-Westphalia to 56.9% in Saxony-Anhalt (Statistisches Bundesamt 2014, 117).
Moral economy

In the most general sense, moral economy is the ‘collective sense of the appropriateness or inappropriateness of certain social practices’ (Mau 2003, 199). The kinds of social practices researchers explore from this perspective vary as widely as the scope of the collectives sharing moral sentiments. Exchanges of some sort figure prominently as the social practice explored in this research and range from economic exchanges in a stricter sense – e.g., market relations in the fair-trade sector (Moberg 2014) – to ‘transactions of symbolic capital’ in social work settings (Coutant and Eidelman 2013, 250). While the focus on specific exchanges or practices is set by the researcher’s interest, the collectives taken into consideration are a matter of research design as well as an empirical question. While Sachweh’s conceptualization of the moral economy of inequality in Germany by looking for ‘a popular consensus about legitimate and illegitimate practices of social exchange’ (Sachweh 2012, 422) leaves room for moral sentiments that are basically shared society-wide, other researchers focus on certain groups of, for example, social service users from the start (Coutant and Eidelman 2013; Khissane 2012).

As German ECEC traditionally, systematically, and administratively belongs to the realm of public welfare, it is useful to draw on studies that apply a moral economy perspective to issues of social inequality and the use of social services. Sachweh (2012, 420) points out that individual beliefs about inequality are ‘embedded in a wider “moral economy”, i.e. an implicit, collectively shared understanding of what constitutes a fair and desirable distribution of societal benefits and burdens.’ The goals of studies like Sachweh’s are to reconstruct this shared understanding and explore to what extent it exists. The argument is that individuals’ behavior can be better understood if their affective responses to their and other’s social relations and interactions – taken to be evaluative moral judgements – are taken into consideration (Sayer 2005, 948) instead of understanding or explaining behavior only ‘externally’ (949) by taking it to be basically determined by the individual’s position in the social structure and its relations to dominant discourses (also see Stefansen and Farstad 2010, 123). The circulation, use, and negotiation of moral sentiments are themselves situated within a broader context, which includes ‘moral configurations which go far beyond the institutional framework in which they take place’ (Coutant and Eidelimann 2013, 250–251). The task is to analyze the complex interplay of individuals’ beliefs and actions, the ‘moral universe’ (Kissane 2012, 191) that frames these, and structural aspects of the broader context.

As institutionalized childcare in Germany, which is state-organized and in large part state-funded, basically is a public good, particular attention will be paid to the respondents’ notions ‘of what are legitimate practices when goods or services are exchanged, as well as how social goods should be allocated’ (Kissane 2012, 191). Publicly funded childcare was in short supply in the localities we researched – the legitimacy of the respective mode of distribution, i.e., ‘the allocation of scarce goods and resources’ (Sachweh 2012, 422), can be expected to be under heightened moral scrutiny. Taking up a spot in a childcare center can be viewed as an
exchange between families or parents and the welfare state. What do parents perceive to be the object of this exchange, and what sense do they make of the regulatory conditions and restrictions under which it takes place? Given that ‘welfare transfers and social service provision involve evaluative judgments of the moral worth of would-be clients, as well as expectations regarding their responsibilities and obligations’ (Kissane 2012, 191; cf. Coutant and Eidemlmann 2013, 250), it is necessary to reconstruct these expectations as the parents perceive them, as well as the parents’ reactions to them. To which degree are the components of an exchange deemed appropriate, and when are the demands of others perceived as being excessive, thus violating the parents’ moral economy (cf. Moberg 2014, 17)?

Interviews, narrations, and identities

According to Sayer (2005, 949), the ‘most important questions people tend to face in their everyday lives are normative ones of how to act, what to do for the best, what is good or bad about what is happening, including how others are treating them.’ He urges us to take seriously this ‘normative character’ (949) of everyday life to complement our analyses and explanations of subjectivity. To do so, feelings such as anger, contempt, and shame are taken to be ‘evaluative responses’ to ‘particular properties of class inequalities and relations’ (Sayer 2005, 950); of course, it is not only class relations that can be perceived or felt as being just or unjust. Individual ethical dispositions are developed ‘partly subconsciously and partly through reflection and repeated practice’ in ‘ongoing mutual and self-monitoring that occurs in everyday life’ (Sayer 2005, 952; cf. Skeggs 1997, 4–5). It is this constant (moral) evaluation by oneself and by others that leads the women in Kissane’s study ‘to construct an image of themselves as self-reliant and morally empowered, benevolent actors’ in their (non-)use of welfare services (Kissane 2012, 190), that guides a parent’s struggle to ‘stay true to her moral principles’ in matters of school choice (Crozier et al., 2008, 266) or that gives rise to feelings of misrecognition and disempowerment in people who lack ‘access to dominant symbolic moral authorization’ (Skeggs and Loveday 2012, 473). In short, questions of morality and moral worth matter to people; they are part of how people understand and make sense of themselves and of others.

In our interviews with parents, both explicit and implicit negotiations of moral worth, entitlement, and the morality of conditions under which ECEC access takes place are salient. In line with Karlsson, Löfdahl, and Prieto, interviews are here taken to be ‘social practice […], in which narratives or stories are seen as socially situated actions through which identities and moral and cultural order are negotiated’ (2013, 213). In interpreting the interviews, they distinguish three levels: the relations of the characters in the story, the relation between interviewee and interviewer, and ‘what culturally available discourses and related subject positions are invoked, resisted or re-negotiated in the narrative interaction’ (214). On all three levels, parents position themselves in relation to others. The subject positions thus claimed are ‘interactional achievements’ (214) in line with non-essentialist understandings of identity as being both per-
formance (related to the subject’s agency) and performative (of institutionalized inequalities, mediated through incorporation or habitualization) (cf. Bettie 2003, 51–53).

Data

The data used in this study was collected as part of a research project aiming to explore the significance of the recent proliferation of high-cost commercial childcare providers. We secured the cooperation of two for-profit childcare centers, two nonprofit centers, and one international school that offers early childhood classes. The centers are located in three different metropolitan regions and were selected to vary along organizational criteria such as capacity and type of provider. All of the centers discussed in this paper are located in the western federal states.

The first commercial center (center C) is the provider’s sole facility; the commercial center D is part of a chain that operates childcare centers in several major cities. Both commercial centers draw clients from all over their respective cities; most of the clients are highly educated professionals. One of the nonprofit centers (center A) is operated by a secular charity catering to a mostly migrant inner-city neighborhood of low socio-economic status. Center B is run by a church’s charity organization and is located in a socially mixed district on the outskirts of the city. Both nonprofit providers operate locally and run several centers in the same city. The fees for the nonprofit centers range between free and about 450 € per month (which is income-dependent and set by the municipality) for under 3s’ full-time care. The commercial centers charge up to 1600 € per month for full-time under 3 care.

In 2012, we conducted semi-structured interviews with at least five parents in each center. The interviews revolved around the choice of childcare center, the parents’ expectations, and routine and the particularities of daily life with the center. The interviews were fully transcribed and anonymized. The analytical procedure was adapted from methods established in the analysis of ethnographic fieldnotes. Significant topics were identified and their analysis was refined in an iterative process of open and analytical coding, writing memos, and exploiting against the theoretical and methodological backdrop outlined above –the contrasts between different cases (cf. Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995, 150–168).

Analysis

This section reconstructs the logics of ECEC access in the two sectors and the parents’ responses to them. As many parents told us about the social criteria governing access to publicly funded centers, these make the start. Obviously, the selection process often means more to parents than just a technical application of certain criteria. The analysis then continues with examples in which a place in a childcare center did not materialize for other reasons. Both types of narrations were chosen because they convey the parents’ sense of whether the out-
come was understandable and just – making these stories prime material from a moral economy perspective. What could be gleaned about the conditions and impositions of the access to publicly funded centers is then compared to an example of the commercial centers’ clients. In the market settings in which these centers operate, a set of practices is deemed appropriate that confronts parents with different opportunities and restraints.

Social criteria and objectified need

Ms. Lange’s two children visited the publicly funded center A; during the interview, she mentioned that, after applying for a spot, only a few days went by before she got a positive answer from the center’s director.

*Interviewer: And back to the enrollment of your children: Did you learn why you so swiftly got a place?*

Ms. Lange: They expanded the facility, didn’t they? And then there were still two places free. And they looked at who lives in the neighborhood and who is most in need of it, that means who’s working, [who] lives in the neighborhood, who is really and I was alone [a single parent, T.E.]. I was working and was nearest to the center. Then, well, I really liked [the way things went].

This excerpt serves well to illustrate the criteria that govern the allocation of places in publicly funded childcare centers. In this case, Ms. Lange was a perfect match: a single mother who works, which she would not be able to do were some sort of external childcare not available, and lives in close proximity to the center. But these prioritization criteria only represent one answer to the question of who is in need of childcare services and what constitutes a legitimate need. These questions, and who decides, were highly contentious issues in the interviews with parents and merit further exploration.

At the time of the interview, Ms. Wolf was in the process of switching her 4-year-old daughter from center B, where she deemed her daughter to be insufficiently stimulated, to a newly established non-profit center in her immediate neighborhood. In the interview, she told us about touring the new center and the decision to enroll her daughter there.

*Interviewer: And did you decide it promptly or did it take some time?*

Ms. Wolf: Well, we decided it quickly, because the situation was that the director of [the center] said to us – you know, there are these specific time slots for which they take children – and she said, ‘We still have a place for 35 hours a week, but not for 45 hours.’ And I was alarmed a bit because in [our current center] I have 45 hours. And I said ‘Oh’
and voiced my thoughts that in this case maybe I could not take the place because I do need the 45 hours. To that she said, ‘Well, if you can supply me with a written statement by your employer that you need the 45 hours, I can call the Youth Welfare Office and ask them if somehow we can get approval for another place.’ And then I did that, [...] and handed the statement in, and she called me the next day, said, ‘You can have a place for 45 hours.’

Ms. Wolf’s specific need to enable self-sufficiency by means of paid work is sanctioned by the welfare state and, in this case, even makes the center’s quota of full-time places negotiable. It is important to note that it is not sufficient for Ms. Wolf to herself assert that this extent of care is necessary, convenient, or nice in some other way – it is her employer who has to certify that she spends the specified amount of time in gainful employment. For her need to be recognized, it is thus necessary to objectify it in a way consistent with the goals of the intersecting childcare, labor market, and anti-poverty policies. We can already glimpse in this example that ECEC regulation and administration have the potential to make the parents’ ‘subjective’ needs and ambitions irrelevant – a fact that surfaced regularly in the interviews.

The (welfare) state’s norms and regulations have deeper ramifications for the social order as a whole and, specifically, for our parents’ identities and subject positions. Lessenich, for example, proposes to understand the welfare state as a ‘mode of social relating’ (Lessenich 2008, 35) that impacts the actors’ relationship to the social order, other actors, and themselves. We can see this at work on the micro level, as Ms. Wolf tells us how she came to join center B two years ago:

Ms. Wolf: [...] and I really had to push the director to get the place at all. Back then, it was incredibly difficult to get a place for under 3s, and I had to mention several times that a) I’m working, and that b) I’m working out of economic necessity. My husband, well, he’s a freelance artist. That again is, it is something different if he’s chief physician somewhere and the wife wants to do a bit on the side, you know, selling bouquets in a flower shop, because otherwise she would be too bored at home. And that’s what I had to strongly emphasize several times, that it’s out of economic necessity that I have to be working and that I urgently need this place and in the end, eventually they budged, albeit quite sluggishly [...].

Ms. Wolf uses her position as the family’s breadwinner to elevate her need for state-supported childcare above that of an imagined chief physician’s spouse. She does so on the level of the characters in her story, as well as on the level of those participating in the interview situation.
(cf. Karlsson, Löfdahl and Prieto 2013, 213–214). The former can be understood as an appropriation of the objectified and officially sanctioned criteria of need, which she uses to demonstrate the reality and urgency of her need to the center’s director; she taps the moral authority of ECEC policy and practice. By stating this hierarchy of need as a fact to the interviewer, the latter is an example of the welfare system’s evaluation criteria having become part of individual self-perception and of the understanding and evaluation of social relations and hierarchies. That Ms. Wolf contrasts her breadwinner position with that of a bored spouse who, by selling flowers, may be doing something neither useful nor necessary, also points to the ‘deeply productivistic scaling of social recognition in the welfare state’ (Lessenich 2007, 162). In the example above, this offers Ms. Wolf a subject position that allows her to lay superior claim to the childcare center’s services.

The case of Ms. Peter (who is actually a chief physician’s unemployed wife) is one example in which the administrative practice renders the individual’s ambitions and their legitimation irrelevant for ECEC access. Ms. Peter visited the commercial center D and mentioned having been ridiculed by the staff of a publicly funded center for even calling them to inquire about free places – obviously, she should have been aware that her family’s comfortable economic position would put her last in line. In the interview, she elaborated on her desire to provide her one-year-old son with a stable environment of interaction with other children; she was new to the city and told us of discouraging experiences with play groups. Although her ambition is in line with the notion of (social) learning in the early years, championed by educational researchers and policy-makers alike, it has no bearing on her access to state-sponsored childcare. In stories such as hers, being excluded seems to be tantamount to the message that, in her situation, she actually (and, given the nature of the prioritization criteria, ‘objectively’) does not need a place – or at least, that state-sponsored childcare is (currently) not designed to meet needs such as hers.

**Bad luck? Particularities of local provision**

It is not only the ranking of applicants according to social criteria that can bring about these outcomes, but other features of the organization of center-based care and particularities of local provision. We asked Ms. Fischer, whose older son is attending center B, about her plans for her younger son:

*Interviewer: Are you planning to bring Max here to [center 5] (Ms. Fischer: Yes, exactly), and after he turns 3?*

Ms. Fischer: Yes, exactly. Well, actually I had hoped that he might get a place as early as this year. He turned 2 this June, didn’t he? But it couldn’t be helped because only in [group A] do they take the under 3s, and those places are more or less being kept available for emergencies.
these places. And he’s too old for [group A], effectively, because they prefer to take the little ones as early as possible. And for the other groups [over 3s, T.E.], he’s too young.

Ms. Fischer’s ambitions to place her son in the center are thwarted not only by the gradation of recognized need (her situation does not qualify as an ‘emergency’), but also by the center’s ideas about the lifecycle of its attendees. Again, this potential childcare opportunity does not seem to be designed to accommodate this specific situation and thus renders the corresponding need nonessential.

Ms. Klein also told us about an organizational mismatch, albeit on a more practical level:

Ms. Klein: […] Then, the opening hours, they are completely useless to us. Well, if the opening hours are until 4 p.m., well at the moment I’m still working part-time. I’m a professor at the university here. Normally I have, when I’m working regularly, full time, then I have 70 to 80 working hours a week. I just can’t leave at 4 p.m. when I’m fully involved. That won’t do. Concerning the working hours, it is impossible to do with a public center.

Ms. Klein might not be doing justice to the publicly funded centers by asserting that all of them close at 4 p.m. (though many actually do), but what she is claiming is the right to do her job according to the conditions inherent to her workplace. She finds that the state-sponsored childcare sector has little to nothing available to accommodate her situation.

It is, overall, striking from a moral economy perspective that, despite the mothers’ implicit and explicit criticism of the scarcity of places, opening hours, and bureaucratic procedures, not a single parent in the study criticized the mode in which the available places are being distributed. There is a consensus that those who are worse off should be given priority access to childcare, and that the official criteria used to determine whom to prioritize are a sensible and just means to this end. All of the parents’ criticisms of the state-sponsored sector must be seen against this background. The mothers do not, in principle, disagree with the current regulation and practice on whom should be served first but on what is left for the taking once the neediest have been supplied. It is about how far childcare provisioning should extend on the other end of the spectrum and which situations, ambitions, and ways of living should – by granting access to a place – be recognized as worthy of (public) support.

Struggles over recognition and opportunities

To better understand this conflict and the mothers’ strong reactions, it is helpful to further examine the relation of the childcare policy’s strong emphasis on labor market participation
and what parents find the system able to deliver. We asked Ms. Peter, who felt ridiculed for having inquired with a publicly funded center, whether she had been given reasons for being denied a place:

Ms. Peter: As far as I’ve understood it, lone parents are first in line, and then couples in which both partners are working, and even if it’s not both that are working, then it’s those with the lower income. Which is perfectly fine with me. I just didn’t know it at the time.

A response of Ms. Weber, who is also with the commercial center D, hints to the entanglement of childcare policy and administration with the broader welfare state agenda in that self-sufficiency through employment may unburden other welfare programs:

Interviewer: I would like to ask you to tell us how you came to join [center 4].

Ms. Weber: […] I inquired with the city’s administration about a place for under 3s, and afterwards I felt like [I was] pegged as naive. Ultimately they told me that if I weren’t a single parent or recipient of Hartz IV [basic security benefits, T.E.] or something, and really in dire need – in a precarious situation of hardship – then there would be nothing that could be done, and that is how we came to join center D.

So in principle, a parent’s ambition to seek or continue employment seems to be viewed favorably in the state-sponsored childcare system; in exchange for their efforts, parents receive state support. In several cases, however, the mothers’ efforts to realize employment-related ambitions were not so easily reciprocated because of either a mismatch of their needs and (local) provision or because their social position – in fact, and rather importantly, their family’s social position – made them low-priority clients. These mothers’ doubts and feelings of disempowerment are precisely an effect of the German welfare state often targeting the family, not the individual. This brings with it a notion of de-individualization for mothers like Ms. Peter and Ms. Weber: As long as there is no danger of their family accessing other welfare and assistance programs, the mothers’ ambitions and desires seem to matter little to the (welfare) state.

In the excerpt below, Ms. Weber pointedly expresses why they should. Leading up to this dialogue was our allusion to media reports of high-priced, commercial childcare centers. These were often labelled ‘luxury kindergartens’ or ‘elite centers’ into which rich parents were claimed to segregate themselves (cf. Ernst, Mader and Mierendorff, 2014).

Interviewer: That means that basically one could summarize that you don’t consider this debate justified?
Ms. Weber: I don’t consider it justified, if it’s really about that you’re doing what is asked for politically, which is that women return to work quickly [after childbirth]. And that they can, in the worst of cases, let’s say everything’s going down the drain and there’s a divorce or something, that they then can support themselves. Then you cannot afford to skip a few years [of employment/career], then you need childcare and that’s not possible with a center that closes at 2:30 p.m. and that is on vacation for six weeks a year because you don’t have this much paid leave [to look after your children yourself]. Thus you’re compelled to spend so much money [on the commercial center] and at the same time you’re being blamed ‘You have the money, don’t you?’ You know?

Ms. Weber draws on the feminist position of women’s economic independence to defend and legitimize her aspirations to continue her professional employment, necessitating suitable center-based care. She finds both the legitimacy and feasibility of her aspirations questioned in her dealings with state-sponsored childcare. To be unfavorably measured against criteria and expectations that the mothers have neither the opportunity nor power to influence is a common feature of the cases in which a state-sponsored childcare spots did not materialize. This, finally, is an aspect that several of the study’s participants painted as being decidedly different in the free-market access to high-priced commercial centers. This is illustrated by further following Ms. Weber’s story.

Finding refuge in the commercial sector

Ms. Weber’s narration of joining center D tells of an experience markedly different from her inquiry with city officials about a place for her 18-month-old son:

Interviewer: After you had chosen center D, how did the enrollment process work?

Ms. Weber: We had a conversation with them. I remember that they sent a quote, we negotiated, and then we took the place […]. And, yes, we had good luck back then. [Group B], the group he was to attend, had just been established. There was still a full-time place available. That was the reason why we were able to negotiate [the price]. Everyone else interested in this place only wanted it part-time, and we said that we’ll take five days a week, from 8 a.m. until 6 p.m., which [the center] liked much, much more, which is understandable, than someone who leaves at 2 p.m. And that was why we were able to, as I said. Ultimately, the price was okay, you know?
Ms. Weber describes her gaining a childcare spot as the result of a bidding competition; due to her interest in a full-time place and ability to pay for it, she was in a good position to win. She positions herself and the center as equal partners negotiating the conditions of a service to be rendered. This marks the situation as decidedly different from the state-sponsored sector in which, to exaggerate slightly, a spot may generously be granted after the mother’s circumstances and motives have been scrutinized.

That the center, in Ms. Weber’s understanding, naturally prefers to sell a full-time place to full-time customers is significant in several ways. First, the responsibility for Ms. Weber being selected is transferred to the provider, as the selection is a seemingly inevitable outcome of its organizational structure and economic mode of operation. Second, Ms. Weber is making use of the economic logic of the situation, and, by transferring responsibility, she distances herself from taking advantage of it (as was insinuated in the media debate and public discourse about commercial childcare centers). Third, this well illustrates the point that modeling social service provisioning after the market, with its self-contained economic logic, immunizes it against (political) considerations of need and just distribution (cf. Apple 2005, 217–218). These points are further illustrated later in Ms. Weber’s interview, as she relates having not been that lucky with her second child:

Ms. Weber: With center D, now it really was the case that I had to decide relatively quickly, because there’s waiting lists, and I also had to enroll her for October, despite not needing the place until November because they wouldn’t have kept the place unoccupied this long. Because Emil [the older son, T.E.] left for school in July, and basically she is taking over his place in the same group, right? They told me, okay, that I would have to do it for October, you know? As I said, obviously, it is a private enterprise and if there’s ten others who say that they’ll take [the place] for September, then that’s how it is.

This time, she was disadvantageously positioned in the bidding competition – others may be willing to take and pay for the free place earlier. This deliberation convinces her to agree to the compromise and not to blame the provider, as it is acting in line with a rationality that is sound and appropriate for its free-market realm of operation. Again, it is hard to imagine considerations like the best interests of this or another child, the parents’ situation, or proximity to home having any place in this rationality.

What further sets the commercial providers apart from the state-sponsored ones is what is missing from Ms. Weber’s account: an entity that questions what she aspires for. She alludes to this as follows:
Interviewer: *If you consider the daily life with the center, how does it turn out for you?*

Ms. Weber: [...] it is great. They are always willing to listen if you’ve got an issue. You are, well, you are the customer, you know? That also is a difference. I’m not the supplicant who comes, and the mother who’s saying, ‘I’m going to be late because of bad road conditions’ or something, right? You are, as silly as it may sound, the customer, and they act accordingly. And for someone who depends on such reliable care, because he needs it for occupational reasons, then that’s magnificent. Or the possibility, when you’re in a tight spot, that you call them, you notify them and someone will stay until 7 p.m., you know?

As ‘someone who depends on such a reliable care,’ Ms. Weber generalizes the dilemmas of making child-rearing and employment compatible and points to a structural problem that affects many. By making absolute the demands of the workplace, she simultaneously demands that childcare services accommodate employment, not the other way around (as may be implied in the haggling over care plans or the obligation to demonstrate the economic necessity of one’s employment). This also positions her as the one who decides on the legitimacy of pursuing a profession and her distribution of time between paid work and childrearing. While in this way laying an assertive claim to agency and autonomy, she also depicts these as precarious – she imagines herself as a supplicant in the state-sponsored system, as someone who has to explain her actions and whose wishes arbitrarily may or may not be granted. The exchange taking place here is different from the one described for the state-sponsored sector: In exchange for the sizable fee the center, apart from taking good care of her children, supports her unconditionally in realizing her ambitions and in managing the difficulties arising from conflicting demands of employment and childrearing.

Conclusion

The mothers seeking access to center-based childcare can be said to be constantly negotiating their own and others’ moral worth and evaluating their position in relation to others. As could be seen, it is almost impossible for parents to navigate the German ECEC system without being (made) aware of their relative socio-economic position. Parents are reminded that there are people doing economically better and worse than they are, and that solidarity is the principle according to which public assistance, i.e. childcare, is to be handed out; on this, the parents agree. To be more specific, it is in the sense of enabling the earning of one’s own living that the selectivity of access to publicly funded childcare is understood by the parents in this study, and in this sense they approve of both the selectivity and its specific mode of implementation. But it is still the shortage of childcare places, necessitating this selectivity, that limits the prac-
itical and symbolic uses of a spot in state-funded childcare. It is along these lines that the examples in the analysis signify moral claims to and struggles over the moral right not only to a childcare place but to the realization of particular ambitions and identities. Being granted or denied a publicly funded childcare spot conveys a judgement about how appropriate, sensible, and realistic one’s ambitions and desires are.

For some of the mothers, the inherent message in being denied a place was that the organization of state-funded center-based childcare is not designed to specifically help them achieve what they want. Apart from the inherent devaluation of their attempts to manage their lives, they perceive this to be a moral transgression because they (partially) model themselves after dominant discourses and imperatives of recent welfare state reform. The wide-ranging reformulation of labor market policies in the 2000s and drastic cuts in the state-mandated unemployment insurance heralded individuality, self-reliance, and industriousness, and parents are increasingly made responsible for enabling their children’s success. For trying to do exactly this they get, in this perspective, nothing in return. In light of current eCEC practices, their aspirations – be they for economic independence, the fostering of the child’s development, or professional self-realization – even seem to be exaggerated.

In the high-priced commercial sector, it is not efforts to further one’s self-sufficiency that are rewarded with a childcare spot; instead, money is exchanged for support that is, to a much higher degree, unconditional. Those who can afford it are thus able to morally authorize their claim to a spot and all that they connect to it themselves.

In the case of Ms. Weber, money was not only transformed into a childcare place, it was converted into freedom from being evaluated and judged against assumptions about family models and division of labor that must, to her, seem outdated. This significantly enhances Ms. Weber’s options both to pursue her profession and to model herself. And because of the significant financial means needed to utilize commercial childcare, this example indicates that, under current circumstances, childcare contributes to making the highly individualized self a classed project.

Notes

1 Exact numbers are not available. According to federal statistics, 2.8% of all childcare centers are operated by for-profit providers (Statistisches Bundesamt 2014, 17–18). This figure includes childcare centers in federal states which subsidize for-profit providers. The high-cost commercial childcare centers discussed in this article operate without state subsidies; their number can be estimated to be only a small fraction of the 2.8% of for-profit childcare centers.

2 All translations (including German literature) were made by the author.
3 Each year, the city’s youth welfare commission determines in advance which care plan (e.g., 25, 35, or 45 hours a week) will be subsidized for which proportion of each nonprofit center’s spots.

4 The background to the ‘emergencies’ Ms. Fischer mentions is an agreement between this city’s youth welfare office and the nonprofit providers. State law sets a maximum number of children per teacher for groups in publicly funded centers with the option to temporarily take on two more children per group. The agreement’s substance is that these two places are being kept available for situations in which the youth welfare office must either quickly arrange for childcare in the context of best-interest cases or succumb to parents approaching the municipality with the state’s guarantee to a place.

References


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