

Discarding social investment and redistribution in the name of austerity? The case of Finnish family policy reforms 2007—2015

Mikael Nygård ^a, Josefine Nyby ^a and Mikko Kuisma ^b

^aÅbo Akademi University, Faculty of Education and Welfare Studies, Turku, Finland; ^bUniversity of Tübingen, Comparative Public Policy Department, Tübingen, Germany

ABSTRACT

Since the 1970s, Finland has conducted family policies that could be labelled social investments, for example, investments in work–family balance or public childcare, while at the same time it has protected the economic standard of families with children through various income transfers. However, after the 2008–2009 financial crisis these policies including those with socially investing objectives have been increasingly subjected to cuts in benefit levels and entitlements in order to lower public expenditure, which raises the question if there has been a shift away from social investments and redistribution towards austerity policies. By analysing government programs from the period 2007–2015, this article discusses if, and to what extent, such a change can be traced in the Finnish government discourse. More specifically the article studies the narrative stories used to legitimise changes (reforms) in existing family policy and to what extent these changes were informed by a social investment perspective focusing on ‘new’ social risks, a traditional redistribution perspective emphasising ‘old’ social risks, or a neoliberal austerity perspective advocating fiscal austerity and welfare cuts. We argue that the first two perspectives were dominant prior to and during the first phase of the international financial crisis, whereas the third perspective became dominant after the crisis. Moreover, the results show that the main storyline in the legitimisation of the reforms was stories of ‘progress’ in combination with stories of ‘control’ and helplessness’.

KEYWORDS

Family policy reform; Finland; ideas; narrative stories; Government program

Introduction

During the past decades, the base of European welfare policy has changed in the course of globalisation, demographic and social changes, as well as mounting fiscal challenges. Consequently, also the focus of family policy has gradually switched from ‘old’ to ‘new’ social risks, such as new and increasingly vulnerable family structures (e.g. single-parent households), or in-work poverty (Bonoli, 2005; Morel, Palier, & Palme, 2012; Taylor-Gooby, 2004). Traditionally, family policy used to be preoccupied with combatting poverty among families through different income transfers (Gauthier, 1996), but has during the last three decades become multidimensional with a stronger accentuation of

CONTACT Mikael Nygård  mikael.nygard@abo.fi  Åbo Akademi University, Faculty of Education and Welfare Studies, Vasa, Finland

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social investments and the prevention of social problems through both income transfers and welfare services. Accordingly, investments in, for example, early childhood education and care (henceforth ECEC) services and work/family balance, have become increasingly important for safeguarding better life prospects for both children and their parents, while at the same time pursuing future macro-economic gains from higher parental employment and investments in human capital (Morel et al., 2012; Thévenon, 2018). Bluntly put, social investments have become the new *Modus Operandi* of the welfare state, and in this process Nordic countries with their long legacy of socially investing policies and dual-earner models have often served as role models for traditionally male-provider countries such as (Western) Germany or France (cf. Björk Eydal, Rostgaard, & Hiilamo, 2018; Fagnani, 2012; Leitner & Wroblewski, 2006; Nygård, Kuisma, Krüger, & Campbell-Barr, 2015).

At the same time, however, the transformation towards post-industrialism has also faced most European countries with a landscape of 'growth to limits' fuelled by sluggish growth, higher unemployment and increasing financial strains, which was further aggravated by the international financial crisis in 2008/09. In the 'Great depression' to follow, public policy including family policy became increasingly subjected to expenditure cuts and other austerity measures intended to curb public expenditures, which brings us to the question whether there has been a downshift in social investments for the benefit of austerity measures (Blyth, 2013; Farnsworth & Irving, 2015; Taylor-Gooby, Leruth, & Chung, 2017).

By analysing government programs from the period 2007–2015, this article discusses if, and to what extent, such a change can be traced in the Finnish government discourse regarding family policy. In this article, family policy relates to different income transfers and services directed to families with children (cf. Hiilamo, 2002; Thévenon, 2011). More specifically, the *aim of the article* is to study the narrative stories used to legitimise changes (reform proposals) in existing family policy, and to what extent these changes were informed by a social investment perspective focusing on 'new' social risks, a traditional redistribution perspective emphasising 'old' social risks, or a neoliberal austerity perspective advocating fiscal austerity and welfare cuts. The analysed period covers the 2008–2009 financial crisis, and the following economic downturn that in the Finnish case lingered on until around 2016 (Ministry of Finance, 2017).

Finland serves as an interesting case, since it is not only a member of the Nordic model famous for its social investments, but also since it has conducted several reforms in social policy during this period (for an overview, see Nyby, Nygård, & Blum, 2018). However, the focus of the article is not on explaining the actual policy development, but rather on how governments have framed reforms within family policy. We thereby follow a linguistic or constructivist tradition, where political language, and the ideas and narrative stories included in these, can be seen as 'actions' per se (Berger & Luckman, 1966) insofar as they influence how problems are perceived and what should be done about them (Béland, 2010; Czarniawska, 2004; Schmidt, 2008). The article thus contributes to the literature on how ideas and narrative stories matter in politics (e.g. Béland, 2010; Schmidt, 2002; Shanahan, Jones, McBeth, & Radaelli, 2017; Stone, 2012), but it also investigates possible changes in the ideational justification of Finnish family policy in a period of economic crisis. By using the Finnish case, we show that narrative stories and ideas from a neoliberal austerity paradigm can be triumphant not only when

facing a traditional family policy legacy, but also when it comes to more contemporary and dominant ideas, such as the social investment paradigm.

The article is structured as follows. In the following section, we first discuss the role of ideas and narratives in policymaking and then outline three ideational perspectives that can be expected to have been influential during the analysed period. Thereafter, we present our data and analytical framework. In the two final sections, we present our findings and discuss our conclusions.

The role of ideas and narrative stories in policymaking

The theoretical framework of this article revolves around the concepts of 'ideas' and 'narrative stories', which have both become increasingly highlighted in the literature on policymaking (Béland, 2010; Czarniawska, 2004; Shanahan et al., 2017; Stone, 2012). According to Peter Hall (1993), ideas serve as 'intellectual maps' that provide means and rationales for behaviour for policy-makers and civil servants. For example, ideas uphold 'policy paradigms' that specify 'not only the goals of policy and kind of instruments that can be used to attain them but also the very nature of the problems they are meant to be addressing' (Hall, 1993, p. 279). However, ideas can also serve as discursive tools for legitimising policy reforms by convincing others that there is a problem with the existing state of affairs, and that change is needed in order to solve the problem (Cox, 2001; Schmidt, 2002). According to Schmidt (2008, p. 305), ideas constitute the very core of policymaking, since it is all about 'what should be done and then communicate them to the public for discussion and deliberation' (Schmidt, 2008, p. 305).

One way of studying how ideas justify policy reforms is to look closer at narrative stories linked to them. Narrative stories refer to linguistic depictions of how a certain phenomenon or problem is understood, how it came to be, and what should be done about it (Czarniawska, 2004; Shanahan et al., 2017; Stone, 2012). They are often tangible, but also ambiguous, and use causality for creating explanations to certain states of affairs, or imperatives for future action. Moreover, constructions of target groups and their degree of deservingness (*cf.* Van Oorshot, 2006) are central for sustaining the stories (Blum & Kuhlmann, 2019; Stone, 2012). Policies to the poor can, for example, be scrapped by denying their deservingness, or by 'blaming the victim'.

According to Stone (2012), narrative stories usually revolve around two main nodal points, which are questions of 'change' and 'power' (see also Blum & Kuhlmann, 2019). When it comes to the first nodal point ('change'), the stories generally bifurcate into stories of 'progress' or 'decline'. Whereas the former implies that something 'good' is about to happen, for example, that a social right is expanded and that there is a progress in relation to previous conditions, the latter communicates that something 'bad' is about to happen, for example, a cutback in a certain welfare program. By contrast, the second nodal point ('power') is linked to the question of 'why' this happens, and what roles certain actors play in this process. Accordingly, 'power' stories often bifurcate into stories of 'control', where reforms symbolise acts of strength and wilfulness, and are depicted as conscious and deliberated actions, or stories of 'helplessness', which, for example, can frame an action as the 'only alternative'. Obviously, these storylines are not the only possible ones, nor are they necessarily distinct or stable over time.

Although its simplicity this model enables us to categorise how reforms within family policy have been legitimised through stories, and to do this as a part of the narrative policy framework (Shanahan et al., 2017), but also to study how these stories may be linked to more general ideational constructions. However, Stone's (2012) model is just one of the many approaches of studying political discourses, and it can be said to differ from, for example, discourse analysis because of its primary focus on more mundane contexts (Shanahan et al., 2017; Stone, 2012). Yet it bears strong resemblance to previous works on political discourses of the welfare state (e.g. Cox, 2001; Schmidt, 2002). For example, in the case of unpopular welfare reforms, such as cutbacks, governments often use stories of 'decline', 'irresistible forces' or 'necessities', for trying to create public consent and to avoid blame (Pierson, 1994).

In this article we use a theoretical and analytical approach that combines the insights on ideas (e.g. Béland, 2010; Cox, 2001; Hall, 1993; Schmidt, 2008) and narrative stories (Czarniawska, 2004; Stone, 2012) with insights from the family policy literature (e.g. Nyby et al., 2018; Nyby, Nygård, Autto, Kuisma, & Blum, 2017; Thévenon, 2018; Björk Eydal et al., 2018; Van Gerven & Nygård, 2017; Kuebler, 2007). Ideas and narrative stories are essential for the social construction of the world (Berger & Luckman, 1966), but can also serve as legitimising devices when it comes to changes, such as family policy reforms (Kuebler, 2007; Nyby et al., 2017). In this view, narrative stories are central for the actual legitimisation, but they are also often attached to more general ideational perspectives, or 'policy paradigms' (Hall, 1993) that nurture them normatively and intellectually. However, this is not always the case, since stories can be general, or shared between different ideational perspectives. Still, what we propose here is a linguistic and constructivist approach for studying how reform proposals within family policy are legitimised through narratives (when a new government sets out its program) and how these are linked to more general ideational perspectives. This does not entail an analysis of the degree of accordance between government discourse (as presented in government programs) and the actual policy development save some general discussions that, for example, help to understand (sudden) mid-term changes in the governments' family policy discourse.

Which influential ideas concerning families were then at stake in Europe and Finland during the studied period, and how can they be expected to have influence Finnish governments? Based on the family policy literature (e.g. Björk Eydal et al., 2018; Forssén, Jaakola, & Ritakallio, 2008; Hiilamo, 2002; Nyby et al., 2017; Nygård & Krüger, 2012), but also literature on ideas (e.g. Blyth, 2013; Morel et al., 2012), we can identify at least three dominant ideational perspectives (see Table 1). These perspectives should be understood as theoretically postulated ideal categories rather than reflections of reality. Moreover, they are not distinct or mutually exclusive, but partly overlapping with relevance also for other policy fields.

The first ideational perspective, the *Traditional Redistributive Perspective* (TRP), builds on a long Western tradition of state protection of families (Gauthier, 1996). The main focus of this ideational perspective has been to combat 'old' social risks, such as poverty, inequality or deficient housing, which in the Finnish case led to the development of a relatively extensive and largely universal family policy regime during the post-war period (Forssén et al., 2008; Hiilamo, 2002). In this perspective, equality in outcome is a central ambition, as well as different forms of income transfers that seek to redistribute income between families. According to the family policy regime literature

Table 1. Main values, risk focuses, and target groups of the Traditional Redistribution (TRP), the Social Investment (SIP), and the Neoliberal Austerity Perspective (NAP).

	TRP	SIP	NAP
Main values	Equality in outcome, social protection, here-and-now redistribution, protecting state	Gender equality, employability, activation, work/family balance social inclusion, over-the-life redistribution, human capital, enabling state	Equality of opportunity, individual responsibility, freedom of choice, competition, workfare state
Risk focus	Mainly 'old' social risks	Mainly 'new' social risks	No or little recognition of social risks whatsoever
Main target groups (deservingness)	Families with children (universalism)	Working parents, single-parent households, children (selectivism and universalism)	Poor families with children (selectivism)

(e.g. Korpi, 2000), this perspective would be labelled a 'general family policy model', which means rather generous family income supports, often directed to the main provider. In the Finnish setting, this support has been largely universal, which means for example that all families, irrespective of incomes, receive child benefits. Moreover, support of this kind has been supplemented with gender-equality-oriented publicly funded childcare and elderly care, as well as free education, since the 1970s (Björk Eydal et al., 2018; Forssén et al., 2008). The TRP has for a long time been an important part of the Finnish family policy model, and has continued to hold sway in the 2000s, which can be seen from the relatively high public spending on universal child benefits and other direct income transfers (OECD, 2018).

The second influential perspective, which covers also other areas than family policy, is the *Social Investment Perspective (SIP)*. The roots of this perspective can be traced back to Mid-War Social Democracy, but it resurfaced in the 1990s as the OECD and the EU started looking for a 'new welfare state', and new solutions to the problem of sluggish growth (Esping-Andersen, Gallie, Hemerijck, & Myles, 2002; Jenson, 2010). Despite the lack of academic consensus on the SIP, one of its main characteristics is that it sees social (and family) policy as investments in social inclusion and (future) economic growth (Esping-Andersen et al., 2002; Morel et al., 2012). Within family policy, this means a focus mainly on 'new' social risks and needs, emerging from new and often vulnerable household constellations, difficulties of balancing family and working life, and increasingly insecure labour markets and careers (Bonoli, 2005; Van Gerven & Nygård, 2017). This has given priority to policies that facilitate parental employment and gender equality, for example, through universal welfare services (such as ECEC), work/family reconciliation arrangements, and more selective 'welfare-to-work' benefits (e.g. income tax credits) for vulnerable households, such as single-parent or immigrant families (*ibid.*, Hemerijck, 2013). But also children as a group of their own have been constructed as a main target group, not least because of the allegedly virtuous effects that ECEC have on children's human capital formation and their future prospects (Morel et al., 2012). In a way, the welfare state according to SIP can be seen rather as an enabling or activating state, seeking to include families in the market, rather than to protect families from it (Hemerijck, 2013). As noted above, Finland has for a considerable period of time conducted policies that come close to what would today be labelled SIP policies, such as extensive investments in public childcare or older care (Forssén et al., 2008). However, these policies were not originally framed as SIP

policies aimed at remedying ‘new’ social risks; instead they were rather ‘Social Democratic’ supplements to the Finnish family policy model, where SIP elements were combined with TRP elements, and where ‘new’ social risks gradually became highlighted alongside ‘old’ risks (Nygård, 2010).

The third ideational perspective, the *Neoliberal Austerity Perspective* (NAP), which is the most general of the three, emphasises fiscal austerity and a (more) limited state involvement in welfare. According to Farnsworth and Irving (2015, p. 1), Europe entered a ‘new’ era of austerity after the international financial crisis in 2008–2009, which resulted in budgetary cuts and cuts in social protection schemes across Europe. Ideas on austerity are obviously not new in the history of the welfare state; there has always been a need to balance tax revenues and public expenditures. However, the special feature of this ‘new era’ is the dominance that austerity has gained in the political and economic discourse (Blyth, 2013). Some observers (e.g. Clarke & Newman, 2012) have even argued that the austerity turn is influenced by neoliberal ideology (cf. Taylor, 2007). Not only is it critical towards public spending, fiscal stimulus and welfare state expansion, it also advocates tax reductions as well as income and wealth dispersion (cf. McBride, 2015). Obviously, austerity may apply differently to certain policy contexts and countries. Transferred to family policy, the NAP would most probably mean cuts in welfare programs, and more selective policies oriented to the poorest of families. A number of studies (e.g. Blum, Formánková, & Dobrotic’, 2014; Chzhen, Nolan, Cantillon, & Handa, 2017; Nyby et al., 2017; O’Hara, 2015) have shown this to be the case in most European countries after the 2008–2009 financial crisis. If the NAP recognises social risks, these are more likely to be ‘old’ social risks, but since the main creed of NAP is for people to be self-sufficient, and welfare benefits to be directed only to the (undeserving) poorest, risk conceptualisations of this kind are rather unlikely in the first place.

To sum up, we have in this section discussed the role of narrative stories and ideas in family policymaking. We have argued that Stone’s (2012) narrative model can be a fruitful model, amongst others, to study discursive legitimisation of policy reforms, and we have also suggested that such stories are likely to be linked to more general ideational perspectives, or ‘policy paradigms’ (cf. Hall, 1993), but that this need not always be the case. In the next section, we present our analytical approach more in detail, alongside a discussion of our data.

Data and methods

To understand how governments in Finland legitimised family policy changes during the studied period, and how these discourses were linked to more general ideational perspectives, we conducted qualitative content analyses of official government programs. Finnish government programs constitute a rich information source when it comes to policy changes, since they state the policies to be conducted during the next election term. They emerge from the negotiations between parties after a national election and thus constitute a compromise between different political platforms, interests and ideological views (Wiberg, 2006). By studying such programs it is possible identify not only narratives used for legitimising changes in policy but also to ascertain whether such discourses reflect a more fundamental change in the way that family

policy is understood on a governmental level. This does not, of course, mean that governments always fulfil their policy proposals, but still they can be considered to have much influence over the policies to come (*ibid.*).

In total, eight government programs were analysed. Alongside five official government programs, also some additional government reports and mid-term reviews were as a way of checking how government discourses may have changed between elections (see [Appendix 1](#)).¹ The five governments in office during the analysed period were PM Vanhanen's centre-right coalition 2007–2010 (Centre Party, National Coalition, Swedish People's Party, Green League), PM Kiviniemi's coalition 2010–2011 (identical to the previous), PM Katainen's left-right coalition 2011–2015 (National Coalition, Social Democratic Party, Left Alliance, Swedish People's Party, Green League, Christian Democrats), PM Stubb's left-right coalition 2014–2015 (National Coalition, Social Democratic Party, Swedish People's Party, Green League, Christian Democrats), and PM Sipilä's centre-right coalition inaugurated in 2015 (Centre Party, National Coalition, Finns Party).²

The length and specificity of the programs varied from very long and detailed programs (Vanhanen II, Sipilä) to very short and general ones (Kiviniemi, Stubb). Moreover, references to reforms with relevance to family policy were not necessarily located only under headings related to welfare policy, they could also be found in relation to, for example, macroeconomics or education policy.

The analytical approach followed a qualitative, constructivist, procedure that consisted of three steps. First, general readings of the programs were made in order to get a sense of the whole and to locate chapters, text paragraphs, and sentences relating to families and family policy. Second, direct or indirect mentions of policy changes (reforms) in this field were registered. The third and final step bifurcated into components. Initially, we registered 'stories' used for legitimising reforms, and to categorise them according to Stone's (2012) two nodal points ('change'/ 'power'), and her four main storylines (progress/decline and control/helplessness). The second part was to find mentions related to one or several of the ideational perspectives portrayed in [Table 1](#). Whereas the aim of the first part was to identify narrative stories used to legitimate family policy reforms according to Stone's (2012) model, the latter part aimed at searching for ideational elements that could help us trace a possible shift in the government's family policy discourse over time.

We used a deductive, or theory-driven, version of qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), which means that we coded the narrative stories we could find according to Stone's (2012) model, and coded mentions of objectives, values, risk conceptions and target groups related to the three perspectives in [Table 1](#). The analysis was conducted by one of the authors and parts of the data was re-analysed by the other authors as a way of checking coding robustness and reliability.

One limitation in this approach is the data, that is, the controlled and technical way in which Finnish government programs are written. Since they are generally rather instrumental with a low degree of transitivity, they are not perhaps the most

¹All programs are available in English on the Finnish government's home page (<https://www.valtionneuvosto.fi/en>).

²After MEP Jussi Halla-aho was elected as the Finns Party leader in June 2017, the former core of the party, including previous leader Timo Soini, formed a new party (Blue Reform) and they inherited Finns Party's place in the Sipilä government.

fertile ground for locating narrative stories. However, when it comes to policy the data is more suitable, since government programs are central for constructing national policy goals for the next government term. Indeed, they can be seen as 'lists' that pinpoint central policy changes to be conducted during the next years to come. If we can find narratives in such 'infertile' documents, this would provide support for the assumption that narrative stories matter in politics. In the following section, the results from the analysis are presented accompanied by text excerpts to justify our interpretations.

Findings

The vanhanen and kiviniemi governments (2007–2011): a combination of the TRP and the SIP

By the time of the 2007 Finnish parliamentary election, the economic situation of families was still suffering from the massive cutbacks made during the previous recession in the early-1990s (Salmi, Sauli, & Lammi-Taskula, 2009). Consequently, the new government led by PM Vanhanen declared its continued commitment to curb poverty and inequality through improvements of family transfers, such as the child benefit supplement for single parents, the minimum level of the parental allowance and child home-care allowance, and through more flexible arrangements for balancing family and working life, for example, by a development of the ECEC system.

The position of poor families with children will be alleviated and social differences mitigated by improving the financial position of such families. (Government program, 2007, p. 49)

These policy measures pertained partly to the TRP and the regulation of 'old' social risks such as unemployment or ill health, but also partly to 'new social risks', such as single-parent families, and work/family imbalances, which suggests an ideational influence also from the SIP. The perhaps strongest indications of a SIP influence come from the proposals to strengthen and diversify ECEC services, to facilitate work/family balance, and to enhance gender equality in the parental leave system and in the labour market.

Paternity leave will be extended by 2 weeks. The reform will be implemented in connection with the 2010 budget. Steps will be taken during the electoral period to explore the potential for a more extensive reform of the parental leave system. In order to ensure that women are in a genuinely equal position in worklife, compensation for the cost incurred by the employer for employees with children will be increased (Government program, 2007, p. 49).

However, there were no explicit references to the SIP in the program, which can be explained by the fact that these ideas were not new in Finnish family policy, and by the fact that conservative parties are generally less keen on openly embracing SIP ideas than Social Democrats (Bonoli, 2005). We can therefore conclude that both the TRP and the SIP were influential for the family policy reforms listed in this program. This concurs with findings from previous research (Nygård, 2010), which shows that 'new' ideas (linked to the SIP) on family policy grew stronger in Finnish election manifestos during the late-1990s and early-2000s, and became an intrinsic part of the discourse on the

'Finnish family policy model, alongside of 'old' family policies seeking to safeguard families from the market through, for example, universal child benefits. By contrast, it is harder to find explicit influences from the NAP, except for some mentions of the need to maintain fiscal sustainability through spending limits, public productivity programs, and an overhaul of the social protection system. Also the construction of target groups can perhaps be seen as a reference to the NAP, since it is more selective than universal ('poor families'). However, explicit proposals to cut spending were not found, and the proposal to reform the social policy system needs to be put in historical and ideological context. The Centre Party has traditionally been more committed to safeguarding basic social benefits than income-related ones, and has on several previous occasions advocated an overhaul of the Finnish social protections system to meet this end (Nygård, 2010).

When it comes to the issue of how the policy reforms were legitimised, it was (expectedly) difficult to find explicit narrative stories that could be linked directly to the reforms. The narrative stories that could be found (Stone, 2012) were mostly on a general level, relating to the overall social or economic context, or future prospects for the country. Nevertheless, it was possible to detect a distinct pattern of narrative storytelling in relation to family policy reforms that also surfaced in subsequent programs. This pattern showed that family policy reforms are almost always legitimised through 'stories of progress' combined with suitable mixes of 'control' and 'helplessness'. For example, in the 2007 Vanhanen program, the proposed expansions of the abovementioned selective transfers were legitimised as a natural continuation of the policy legacy of earlier Centre-led governments, but also as deliberate actions ('control') to remedy poverty in a situation where previous measures seem not to work ('helplessness'). Even in the 2009 mid-term review (Government mid-term policy review, 2009, p. 1), where the government called for stricter fiscal prudence than before due to the international financial crisis ('decline'), the storyline was still overshadowed by the government's commitment to go on helping both low-income families and working parents to balance their work and family life ('progress' + 'control'). Indeed, even if direct cuts of family benefits would be proposed (which they seldom are in programs), stories of 'progress' would still have the upper hand alongside stories of 'decline'. Whereas the latter may serve as partial justifications of unpopular decisions to come, by, for example, referring to some worrying state of affairs, the former (together with forceful stories of 'control'/'helplessness') is still needed for recasting the proposal as something potentially 'good', or beneficial for some groups, in order to avoid blame or electoral risks (*cf.* Pierson, 1994).

The program of the Kiviniemi government (2010–2011), which was inaugurated in 2010 due to Vanhanen's resignation as PM and leader of the Centre Party, did not propose any new family policy reforms, instead it was committed to implementing the reforms launched by its predecessor (Government program, 2010, *n.p.*). Consequently, in 2010, it restored inflation-compensating indexation (which had been removed during the 1990s recession) for some of the main family benefits (e.g. child benefits, parental insurance allowances and home-care allowances) and oversaw an implementation the parental leave reform (a two-week extension of paternal leave) that had been envisaged already in 2007 (Nyby et al., 2017). Also in terms of discourse, there was little change between this program and the 2007 program, since both TRP and SIP ideas were clearly present. However, we could detect a slightly more prominent role for NAP ideas, since there was a growing concern for the financial sustainability of the welfare state that

allegedly would require stricter expenditure controls for stopping public expenditures from growing. Direct cuts in welfare were not mentioned, but then again ‘measures to increase productivity’, or imposing ‘spending limits for local government finances’, can in fact be interpreted as euphemisms for spending cuts.

In terms of narrative legitimisation, the 2010 program conveyed little new, save a somewhat more prominent role for ‘decline’ stories, urging the public to realise the threat from soaring debt, and to accept a more austere financial policy, as well as ‘control’ stories, portraying stricter budget control and higher public sector productivity as adequate and powerful actions by the government.

The Katainen and Stubb governments (2011–2015): growing influence of the SIP and NAP

After the general election in 2011, a coalition consisting of six parties from the Conservatives on the right to the Left Alliance (successor to the old socialist party) on the left (‘the six-pack’) was formed.³ In its program the government declared its ambition to pursue equality and to combat poverty in line with the ‘Nordic welfare model’, which ‘has proven to be the best social system’ since it ‘combines social cohesion with competitiveness (Government program, 2011, p. 5). Yet the core of this program was very much about how to stabilise the economy, increase employment, ‘make work pay’, and to safeguard the financial sustainability of the welfare state in a time of deepening crisis.

Work generates welfare. Finland’s future success and sustainable funding of the welfare state are dependent on a high employment rate. It is the Government’s goal to ensure that all those capable of working are given the opportunity and incentive to do so./ ... /Rising inequality represents a threat to Finnish society and the Finnish way of life. The Government will act with determination to develop and reinforce the basic structures of the welfare society. (Government program, 2011, p. 5)

Compared to earlier governments, Katainen’s program conveyed a stronger influence of NAP ideas in relation to the TRP and SIP. This can, for example, be seen from the need to counteract the financial ‘sustainability gap’, for example, by increasing incentives for taking up work and making the welfare system more activating. The frequently used phrase ‘paid work is the best remedy against poverty’ (Government program, 2011, p. 95), seems to argue for a shift of the responsibility for families’ economic wellbeing back to the families themselves. Yet this can also be interpreted as something linked to the SIP, since it advocates social inclusion through work and different welfare-to-work benefits (Hemerijck, 2013). Also, the stronger emphasis on universal welfare services, early education and tailored services for families – policies that are supposed to prevent problems rather than correct them and to strengthen children’s rights and future prospects – can be as signs of a growing SIP influence (Morel et al., 2012). The same goes for the ambition to pursue further reforms of the parental leave system, portrayed

³The new conservative PM, Jyrki Katainen, inherited not only the problem of sluggish growth, high government debt, and rising unemployment in the wake of the crisis, but also had to figure out how to manage a growing public discontent with rising unemployment and strict fiscal policy – something that had helped the populist-nationalist Finns Party to score high in the election (Arter, 2011).

as central for boosting fathers' up-take rates, gender equality, for facilitating a combination of work and part-time child leave.⁴

Meanwhile, although universal basic social security was described as central for citizens' livelihood, and income-related benefits as important for their purchasing power (*ibid.*, p. 96), no improvements of such benefits were proposed. Instead, the focus of family policy was placed on improvements of services and targeted measures in order to alleviate the situation of the 'most disadvantaged' groups in society, such as single-parent households (*ibid.*). Also, work–family balance, the safeguarding of children's interests, and tailored services for families in distress, receive a prominent role in the program (Government program, 2011, pp. 108–109). Put together, this suggests an increasing role of NAP ideas alongside those from the TRP and SIP, especially since the role of selective transfers, such as last-resort social assistances and housing allowances, are highlighted in the program. Also, the construction of target groups, which focuses on 'needy families', 'the most disadvantaged' or 'children', suggests a growing influence from the NAP on the expense of the TRP (*cf.* Table 1).

Since the main policy message in Katainen's program was the need to bring about economic sustainability, which implicitly also implied expenditure cuts, the overall storyline was that of 'decline', combined with a mix of 'control' and 'helplessness'. Allegedly, the deteriorating economic situation requires financial squeezes and cuts ('decline'), and this broad-based government is the 'one for the job' ('control'/'helplessness'). Obviously, the coalition composition in itself, a six-party coalition, was a strategy for avoiding blame for the cuts to come. But another strategy was to recast these cuts as actions of 'responsibility' and 'courage'. Similar to earlier programs, it was more difficult to find explicit stories linked to family policy reforms. Still, we could implicitly trace the same story as in earlier programs, namely that the reforms to come should be seen as 'progresses', since the 'the government still cherishes the Nordic welfare model' and tries to make life easier for the 'most disadvantaged' groups in society, even in times of mounting economic challenges ('control').

In the years to come, the influence from the NAP grew even stronger in the government's discourse (and also in its policymaking). For instances, in 2012 the government decided to freeze the indexing of child benefits for 3 years to cut expenditure. In 2013, this cut was followed by a restriction of the universal right to childcare (Government structural-political program, 2013, p. 9). The government also suggested a direct cut (about 8%) in child benefits (with effect from 2015), which caused a chorus of protests from the opposition as well as from some of the government's own ranks, forcing the Left Alliance to leave the government in March 2014. The narratives

⁴Allegedly, two main obstacles to higher gender equality in Finland were the short periods of fathers' leave and the so-called child home-care leave (which enables parents to care for under-three-year children at home). In 2011, a working group (appointed in 2009) suggested the parental leave to be extended, especially the quota for fathers, and the possibility to part-time care at home to be made more flexible for working parents (SHM, 2011). This became influential for the government's ambitions to extend the fathers' leave during 2011–2012 and to cut the controversial child home-care leave (Hiilamo & Kangas, 2009). The Social Democrats were especially critical of this system, which they saw as a 'women's trap' undermining employment. This led to discussions regarding whether this leave should be shortened or divided equally between parents, and whether the allowance paid during this leave should be cut. In 2013 the government proposed that this leave was to be shared equally between parents. However, due to resistance from the Christian Democrats in government, as well as the Centre Party and Finns Party in opposition, the government refrained from its plans, but managed to get enough parliamentary support for replacing the part-time child home-care allowance with a flexible care allowance (effective from 2014).

legitimising these cuts mainly followed stories of ‘decline’ (‘there is no alternative’), and ‘control’ (‘the government is taking responsibility’) and ‘helplessness’ (‘where others have failed’) (Nyby et al., 2017).

Also, the government program of PM Stubb, who had replaced Katainen as Prime Minister in June 2014, was dedicated primarily to ideas and policy proposals linked to the NAP, since it declared that it is committed to implementing the policy objectives set out by its predecessor in order to curtail public expenditures, reduce public debt and to increase employment rates (Government program, 2014, p. 5). As a part of this ambition, the government later presented the parliament with a bill to cut child benefits with approximately 8% in September 2014 (Government bill, 165/2014), and after a stormy debate, this bill became enacted as law with effect from 2015 (Nyby et al., 2017).

What we see in the discourses of the Katainen and Stubb governments is thus a stronger creed to fight soaring expenditures and debt rates than before, an ambition that concurs with a more profound idea of austerity including welfare cuts (Blyth, 2013; Farnsworth & Irving, 2015; O’Hara, 2015), even if this undermines the economic well-being of those ‘most disadvantaged’ families that the previous government had sought to help through improvements of selective transfers.

The Sipilä government (2015–): the NAP becomes dominant

The trend towards a stronger influence from the NAP can be observed also in the program of the following government, the centre-right government led by PM Sipilä, which was inaugurated in May 2015 after the parliamentary election.⁵ The main theme was about how to lift Finland out of the economic crisis, which meant that the bulk of the program was devoted to actions for creating jobs, boosting growth, reducing public debt and curbing expenditures. It used an instrumental, entrepreneurial-like and future-oriented political language that was set on ‘solving the problems at hand’ and ‘asking the public for support’. To meet this end, it used similar overall narrative strategies as its predecessor, invoking both stories of ‘decline’ and a mix of ‘control’ and ‘helplessness’ (Stone, 2012) for framing the reforms and creating sufficient public support for the ‘difficult decisions’ to be made (Government program, 2015). For example, it used the metaphor of a ‘social contract’ between the government and the public, and implicitly juxtaposed cuts and tax rises to ‘sacrifices’ that everyone must make ‘for ensuring future wellbeing’ and for avoiding future ‘economic catastrophe’.

The Government will seek to build a comprehensive social contract to support decisions aimed at boosting Finland’s economic recovery and improving employment. When implemented, the social contract will strengthen trust between Finns, promote economic growth and support the creation of new jobs. Correspondingly, without these results, pressure to adjust public finances will be much greater whereby, in addition to the EUR 4 billion consolidation decisions, additional expenditure savings and tax increases amounting to around EUR 1.5 billion will be made. (Government program, 2015, p. 10)

⁵This coalition included the Centre Party, the Conservatives and the populist-nationalist Finns Party, which experience considerable electoral success in both 2011 and 2015, for example, by criticizing earlier governments for not investing enough in welfare. Ironically, the party was now to take seat in a government that would continue to pursue, and even speed up, austerity measures (Nyby et al., 2017).

The program envisaged a number of structural reforms, most notably a reform of the governance and funding structure of social and health-care services (the SOTE reform), as well as an overhaul of the social protection reform with more flexible and digitalised solutions and less bureaucracy. Also, a number of policy experiments, such as basic income experiment, were listed. When it comes to explicit family policy objectives, the programme was rather elusive. Nevertheless, a number of concrete proposals could be found, such as a reform of public services, preventive measures or targeted policies to accommodate families and children, investments in schools and early education, and actions to safeguard children's wellbeing (Government program, 2015, p. 22). Seemingly, the needs and risks related to families and children would be manageable and solvable through structural reforms, such as making the service system smarter, more efficient or more digitalised, whereas nothing was said about the economic situation of families nor welfare expansions, or cuts for that matter.

However, in an appendix to the program (Appendix to the Government program, 2015), several reforms for boost tax revenues or cutting expenditures were listed. Among other things, a permanent freeze of the indexation of child benefits and a cuts in the students' study allowances were on the list. This can be interpreted as formal commitment to an austerity paradigm informed by NAP ideas, where little is said about 'new' or 'old' social risks or how envisaged cuts will affect families. The perhaps most dramatic reform proposal to be associated with the Sipilä government was the restriction of the universal right to full-time childcare in the late 2015 (Government bill 80/2015). As mentioned above, the question of whether the right to universal public childcare services should be restricted had been discussed already in the structural-political program of PM Katainen in 2013, but it was not implemented at the time, partly because of resistance from his Social Democratic government partners. However, in 2015, with the Centre Party in the leading position and the Social Democrats in opposition, this reform was back on the agenda. The bill was approved by the parliament in December 2015 despite heavy criticism from political opponents and experts. The reform meant that the right to full-day childcare for children without both parents in full-time work, education, or on family leave was restricted to 20 h per week. Not only was this restriction controversial but it also undermined ideas emphasising on children's development, early learning, social mobility and wellbeing to an economic rationale that favoured mothers' labour market participation and fiscal austerity (Lundkvist et al., 2017). The main narrative framing this cut was economic. Allegedly the universal childcare right was too expensive and had to be downscaled in order to guarantee fiscal sustainability. According to PM Sipilä, cutbacks help to preserve the welfare state, whereas further expansive policies would endanger it and 'send the bill for today's wellbeing to further generations' (Nyby et al., 2017).

The most striking feature of the government narratives related to the Sipilä program is the rather dominant status of ideas relating to the NAP as opposed to the SIP or TRP. The best example of this is perhaps the proposal restriction of the right to full-time childcare in 2015 and the ways these were framed as 'necessary evils' or 'economic necessities' for 'saving the welfare state' and restoring financial stability. Admittedly, Sipilä's program still cling on to some SIP ideas, such as the ambition to strengthen and diversifying services to families and some recent (but failed) attempts to reform the parental leave system (Helsingin Sanomat, 2018), but this does not seem to change impression of a turn towards NAP.

Conclusions and discussion

This article set out to analyse the ideas and narrative stories and ideas in relation to family policy reforms in Finland from 2007 to 2015 a period overshadowed by a financial crisis. Based on the discussion above, two main conclusions can be drawn. First, the results indicate a shift in how Finnish governments constructed family policies (as well as welfare policies generally) from an ideational point of view during this period, suggesting that both social investments and traditional redistributive ideas became downplayed for the sake of ideas linked to a neoliberal austerity paradigm. Whereas the Centre-led governments before and in the beginning of the international financial crisis used narratives that were rooted in the TRP but also tacitly informed by the SIP, later governments (with conservatives and the Centre Party in lead) turned to narratives (and policies) that were highly influenced by the NAP. In the Sipilä government programme from 2015, this influence was almost dominant. This also means that the family policy objects, problem constructions and the risk conceptualisations have changed from narratives addressing both ‘old and new’ social risks (*cf.* Bonoli, 2005) to narratives where macroeconomic concerns have crowded out almost all risk narratives in government programs in favour of austerity.

This change is linked to policy discourses but also to actual policy reforms that range from piecemeal improvements of family transfers in the period 2007–2012 to cuts in welfare in 2013–2017 (*cf.* Nyby et al., 2018). To a large extent the observed changes are related to the crisis and to mounting economic challenges, but they also partly reflect shifts in political ideology. Whereas previous Centre-led governments concentrated more on addressing ‘old’ risks with some reference also to SIP, the more recent conservative coalitions (including Social Democrats) have shifted emphasis towards ‘new’ risks with an increasing adherence to NAP. The Sipilä government is an exception, since such risk conceptualisations were almost non-existent and substituted for austerity and Neo-liberal ideas.

What this means for the future of the Finnish family model is hard to say. In June 2019, a new government was formed with the Social Democrats in lead. In its program, which was published during the review process of this article and therefore not included in the analysis, the government has promised to raise income transfers (child benefits for the fourth and fifth child, the child benefit supplement for single-parent households, and the child maintenance allowance), and to reinstate the right to full-time ECEC for children under seven. Clearly, this new government seeks to shake off the attachment to the NAP, and to change direction of Finnish (family) policy, but whether these ambitions will succeed is still an open question.

The second conclusion is that narrative stories play an important role for legitimising policy changes, especially when it comes to create public consent for cuts and other unpopular policies (Pierson, 1994; Schmidt, 2002). Although the stories were mostly on a more general level and not directly related to family policy reforms, we could detect a pattern suggesting that the most typical pattern of legitimising family policy reforms was to use stories of ‘progress’ and to combine these with a mix of ‘control’ and ‘helplessness’ stories (Stone, 2012). These narrative patterns were linked to reforms in the protection against ‘old risks’, such as cuts in child benefits, but most notably to reforms in the protection against ‘new social risks’, such as the extension of the fathers’ leave or the restriction of the universal right to full-time childcare. The narrative stories

used in these manoeuvres followed a ‘giving-to shape’ pattern, but also a ‘taking-to-control’ or ‘taking-out-of-helplessness’ manner, as described by Blum and Kuhlmann elsewhere in this volume (Blum & Kuhlmann, 2019). For instance, a raise of child benefits can be portrayed as a natural development of earlier policies (‘progress’), or as a willful and informed act to empower or improve the living conditions for the ‘deserving’ group that children constitute. On the other hand, a cut in the same benefit is often framed as an inevitable, albeit regrettable, act of helplessness or control-seeking. However, we need to remember that governments seldom list, or even indirectly acknowledge cuts, since these are politically risky (Pierson, 1994). However, if they do, they often combine stories of ‘decline’, for example, by referring to some external threat for communicating the need to act, and stories of ‘progress’, that seek to recast the unpopular reform in a positive manner by, for example, referring to some greater end (e.g. ‘to save the welfare state’).

However, it is also important to remember that it was difficult to find explicit stories attached to reforms within family policy, and that we often had to interpret the narratives implicitly from the more general stories used in the program. This can be seen as an obvious limitation of this study, and suggests that government programs are not the best data for studying narrative stories. Therefore, future research in this field needs to consider also other data, such as parliamentary protocols as an example, if we want to know more in detail how governments, or other political actors, legitimise changes in family policy. Nevertheless, the fact that we were able to identify at least some narrative stories from government programs shows that the use of narratives is widespread and that they play an important role in policymaking.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Mikael Nygård, PhD, is Professor of Social Policy at Åbo Akademi University, Finland. His research interest ranges from research on societal participation of various groups, such as older adults, youth and people with disabilities, to health-related research and welfare state analysis, with a special focus on family policy reforms.

Josefine Nyby, MSc, is Doctoral Student in Social Policy at Åbo Akademi University, Finland. Her research interest is in the politicization of family policy reforms in Finland.

Mikko Kuisma, PhD, is Research Fellow in Comparative Public Policy at the University of Tübingen, Germany. His research interests lie in the comparative political economy of (European) welfare states, with a special interest in the constitution of citizenship in national models of capitalism. Other related research interests include the role of ideas and discourse in politics and public policy, populism and welfare chauvinism, and Nordic politics.

ORCID

Mikael Nygård  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3928-4114>

Josefine Nyby  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4652-0808>

Mikko Kuisma  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4769-7007>

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Appendix 1 List of analysed government programs and other documents

Programme of PM Matti Vanhanen's Second Cabinet, A responsible, caring and rewarding Finland, 19.4. 2007.

Government's mid-term policy review, 24.2. 2009.

Government statement to Parliament on the Government Programme of PM Mari Kiviniemi, Finland towards a consistent path to growth, employment and stability, 22.6.2010.

Programme of PM Jyrki Katainen's Government, An open, fair and confident Finland, 22.6.2011.

PM Jyrki Katainen's Structural-political program for strengthening growth and curbing the sustainability deficit of the public economy (Fi. Rakennepoliittinen ohjelma talouden kasvuedellytysten vahvistamiseksi ja julkisen talouden kestävyysvajeen umpeen kuromiseksi), 29.8.2013.

Programme of PM Alexander Stubb's Government, A new boost for Finland: growth and employment, 24 June 2014.

Strategic Programme of PM Juha Sipilä's Government, Finland, a land of solutions. 29.5.2015.

Appendix to the Strategic Programme of PM Juha Sipilä's Government, 29.5.2015.

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