Comparative Social Policy
Theory and research

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Welcome to the first volume in the Introducing Social Policy series. The series itself is designed to provide a range of well-informed texts on a wide variety of topics that fall within the ambit of social policy studies.

Although primarily designed with undergraduate social policy students in mind, it is hoped that the series – and individual titles within it – will have a wider appeal to students in other social science disciplines and to those engaged on professional and post-qualifying courses in health care and social welfare.

The aim throughout the planning of the series has been to produce a series of texts that both reflect and contribute to contemporary thinking and scholarship, and which present their discussion in a readable and easily accessible format.

It is entirely appropriate that the first volume in the series should be concerned with cross-national perspectives in social policy. Over the past 20 years the study of social policy has been enriched and extended by the comparative perspective which has moved the study of welfare influences, arrangements and outcomes beyond the confines of one country or nation-state in isolation.

This emphasis is reflected in the contents of Patricia Kennett’s book. But her contribution to the series is also more distinctive since she engages with the process – as well as the outcomes – of cross-national social policy research, and with the implementation of an integrated approach to comparative social policy. That leads her to discuss issues around citizenship, gender and development, as well as globalization, the role of the nation-state and supra-national governance.

Patricia Kennett has provided an exciting contribution to comparative social policy studies which successfully integrates the results of recent research with an informed discussion of the research process itself.

David Gladstone, University of Bristol
The changing context of social policy
The expansion of the welfare state across Western Europe following the Second World War occurred in the context of full (male) employment, increasing affluence and an extension of social rights for the majority of the population. The prevailing discourse of this period was that the state had a central role to play in ensuring that citizens enjoyed a certain minimum standard of life, economic welfare and security as a matter of right. National welfare regimes helped to underpin a global system of interacting national economies characterized by mass production and mass consumption. This model of institutionalized, bureaucratic provision and social rights was perceived as the inevitable outcome of a ‘modern’ or developed society. More recently, the dismissal of the post-war consensus and social Keynesianism and the increasing influence of transnational factors in the policy-making arena have been accompanied by higher levels of unemployment, increasing inequality and a renegotiation of the social contract between the state and the individual. These changes have contributed to a rethinking of the theoretical and analytical traditions of the welfare state as well as a fundamental reappraisal of the assumption embedded in social policy research. It is in this context that this book explores the conceptual and analytical challenges for cross-national social policy research and considers the strategies and approaches that may contribute to an understanding of the complexity of contemporary social change.

Nation, state and welfare in cross-national research
More than ever, the world in which we live is a fluid and dynamic environment. Social, cultural and economic manifestations are imported and
exported across borders. People flow between countries and there has been a proliferation of international organizations such as the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), the World Bank, the European Union (EU) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and an increase in the number of transnational companies which have no specific national base. Chapter 1 explores these and other key aspects of globalization, and considers the political and ideological developments of recent decades that have facilitated the process. The expansion of capitalist social relations, the end of the ideological opposition between East and West, the emergence of a ‘transnational governance’, and the discrediting and demise of Keynesian macro-economic management and its replacement by a neo-liberal agenda emphasizing deregulation, privatization and free trade are all elements of a new era of global capitalism which are said to have undermined the post-war social democratic commitment to the welfare state and limited the autonomy of the nation-state. Chapter 1 will argue that we need to understand and appreciate the globalizing processes taking place but must remain sensitive to differences between nations as well as similarities. Global processes interact with nation-states in a way which reflects the political, cultural and institutional dimensions of individual countries. At the present time the nation-state is a useful unit of analysis even though there are a variety of global processes occurring. It is still central, along with other providers, to the delivery and administration of welfare. The reconfigured international order is still primarily one of politically constructed nation-states which provide the administrative units and much of the infrastructure through which social policy is implemented and delivered. Policy provision is not simply about meeting the needs and demands of international capital to provide services and infrastructure at the lowest possible cost. The nation-state remains an arena of contestation, where social struggles and social rights are won and lost and where governments strive for national legitimacy.

The discussion in Chapter 1 will conclude with an exploration of the European Union’s drive towards the harmonization of social policy and its impact on the links between the state, welfare and social policy. These links vary throughout EU countries and reflect the particular profile of individual nations, for example the strength of the trade union movement, political parties, gender relations, religion, culture and tradition. Thus, causal relationships and the outcome of processes are specific to cultural and political forms and, as such, the particularities of individual nations take on real significance. Each brings with it a historical and cultural context within which specific patterns of institutional and organizational arrangements are embedded. A fundamental challenge for those undertaking cross-national research is to grasp the relationship and dynamic between domestic political factors and supranational institutions in the formulation of social policy. The chapter considers briefly a range of approaches for understanding the dynamics of global decision-making and draws on the social dimension of
the EU to explore the character of global governance as well as the extent to which we can talk of supranational social policy instruments and provision (Deacon et al. 1997).

Clarifying concepts in cross-national social policy analysis

The current context of cross-national research is one that requires an integrated social policy framework (Gough 2000). This integrated framework needs to look beyond the boundaries of the state not only in terms of transnational activities, but also in terms of the mixed economy of welfare within different societies. As Rose (1991) argues, analysis between states requires an understanding of what happens within states, for national governments respond to national electorates as well as to international pressures. More than that, national governments impose constraints upon what can and cannot be done internationally. Before we can understand interaction between nations we must understand what goes on within them, and relate that knowledge across national boundaries through the use of generic political concepts.  

(Rose 1991: 462)

Chapter 2 is primarily concerned with the process of cross-national social policy analysis. It outlines the distinctive features of this type of research as well as the various definitions and interpretations of this approach. While Crow (1997) has emphasized the importance of micro-comparisons between groups and localities within societies, these studies fall outside the scope of this volume in which the terms comparative and cross-national are used interchangeably and refer to the explicit, systematic and contextual analysis of one or more phenomena in more than one country.

Issues of definition are central to understanding and exploring social phenomenon and in the construction of an integrated social policy framework. Thus, a particular concern of comparative, cross-national analysis (explored in Chapter 2) is the construction and implementation of robust and appropriate concepts. The difficulties of using concepts such as nation, country and society in cross-national research are highlighted by Crow (1997), who argues that the boundaries of nation states have become increasingly attenuated . . . It can no longer be assumed that people sharing a particular geographical space will also have the common social ties and culture by which ‘society’ has conventionally been defined.  

(Crow 1997: 10)
However, the concept of society should be utilized not in the sense of an isolated, impermeable ‘bounded unit’, but as ‘constituted by multiple, overlapping networks of interaction’ (Mann 1993: 738, cited in Crow 1997: 16). This principle can also be applied to the study of social policy and the ‘welfare state’. While recognizing that there is no agreed definition of the term ‘social policy’, Baldock et al. (1999: xxi) define it as ‘a deliberate intervention by the state to redistribute resources amongst its citizens so as to achieve a welfare objective’. The welfare state is a term which has been widely used to denote the extensive involvement of government in a range of activities to provide social services and promote social well-being through a set of social and economic policies. Schottland (1967) suggests that it is also useful to identify the welfare state as a legal state whereby statutory rights entitle citizens to a range of services. This approach, according to Rodgers (2000), sees the welfare state as

performing an administrative function within the general apparatus of the state charged fundamentally with ensuring the defence of the statutory rights whilst also delineating the limits of legal obligations on individuals and social agents to meet welfare responsibilities within society.

(Rodgers 2000: 8)

Alber et al. (1987) have expressed concern at the limitations of the traditional social policy perspective in cross-national research which has tended to concentrate only on state programmes and has utilized measures such as social spending levels or programme coverage to capture welfare output. According to the authors, this has often resulted in reducing the ‘welfare state’ to one or two highly aggregated indices. They argue that boundaries between state and non-state functions are problematic in ways that confound comparative research. Further, the interplay of public and private institutions around issues of social protection has become so complex that the isolation of state welfare expenditure as the object of study makes little sense theoretically.

(Alber et al. 1987: 561)

It is important to understand the structure of welfare, its composition and the complex and changing patterns of relationships between different producers. The state is not the sole institution to provide welfare in a society; it derives from a multiple of sources.

Baldock et al. (1999) have suggested the concept of welfare system which they define as

the range of institutions that together determine the welfare of citizens. Amongst these are the family and the community networks in which it
exists, the market, the charitable and voluntary sectors, and the social
services and benefits provided by the state.

(Baldock et al. 1999: xxi)

Specific national mixes and webs of welfare will vary. More specific
elements will follow in later chapters but even at a general level it is possible
to begin to explore the mosaic of variation across countries. It could be
argued that in Britain and the USA, there has been greater scope for the pri-

cate sector to promote welfare than in Germany, for example, where the
voluntary sector has an institutionalized and established role. In Australia
the labour market plays a key role and this model has been characterized as
‘the wage-earner’s welfare state’ (Castles 1985). The role of the family, and
in particular women, is also central to the production of welfare across
societies. However, not only do family forms vary, but also the extent to
which the family, and more specifically women, are considered the ‘natural’
providers of welfare varies from country to country (Sainsbury 1996). Wel-

care systems can be predicated on the family or kinship network as welfare
providers with religious and philosophical beliefs and values reinforcing
‘compulsory altruism’ (Land and Rose 1985) or what Hill (1996: 5) refers
to as ‘webs of interlocking obligations and emotions’. Other commentators
argue that the emphasis should not be on welfare state, but on welfare

society (Robson 1976; Rein and Rainwater 1981; Rodgers 2000). For
Rodgers, the notion of welfare society encapsulates the ‘undertheorized
relationship between state-sponsored welfare programmes and their recep-
tion by and impact on society, both at the level of individual behaviour and
of social and community relations’ (Rodgers 2000: 9). It is these broader
conceptualizations of nation, state and welfare which are utilized in this
book as the most appropriate for cross-national social policy analysis. Ball
et al. (1989) and Esping-Andersen (1990) have both emphasized adopting
the ‘broader view’ in comparative analysis and have cautioned the
researcher on analysing concepts in isolation and failing to recognize their
interconnectedness and mutual determination. What is certain is that com-
parative research which focuses exclusively on government social provision
can be misleading and may well obscure the complex webs of welfare that
emerge in different societies rather than expose them. Thus, cross-national
social policy analysis is as much about appreciating relationships across
policy areas and between the range of different providers in the national
context as it is about recognizing and integrating a global perspective into
comparative research.

It is also about understanding that values and interpretations of phenom-

enon vary from society to society and change over time. The chapter looks
at the evolving debates around poverty and disadvantage, and homelessness
to show how social ‘problems’ are constructed and how their meanings and
significance are manipulated through policies, definitions and units of measurement. The increasing availability of international and comparative data sources has expanded opportunities for cross-national social policy research. However, as Chapter 2 argues, it is vital that the data are utilized and interpreted critically and cautiously and, where possible, qualified by more in-depth statistical and empirical research.

Approaches to cross-national analysis

The recognition of the need for a broader perspective in cross-national comparative studies has been accompanied by shift in theory and analysis. Theoretical frameworks provide different ways of obtaining or producing different types of knowledge. According to Rosamond (2000), what is written about welfare is grounded in a particular set of assumptions about the way the world operates:

Knowledge is not neutral. We gather it according to agreed rules that change over time and which, in turn, influence the sorts of questions we ask . . . different theoretical perspectives produce and reproduce different types of knowledge. Each theory begins with a ‘basic image’ of social reality (ontology) upon which is built a theoretical superstructure including established ways of gathering knowledge (epistemology).

(Rosamond 2000: 5, 7)

Chapter 3 will trace the development of some of the most influential perspectives which have sought to explain the growth of the welfare state. The main focus of the chapter is on approaches to cross-national social policy analysis. However, the discussion takes a broader approach in the belief that assumptions and explanatory frameworks do not emerge in isolation but often draw upon, extend or refute alternative perspectives. Thus, the key aims of this chapter are to show how first, theoretical perspectives do not emerge independently but are historically embedded in particular social and intellectual contexts, and second, how different perspectives articulate and utilize particular frameworks and conceptual tools.

In relation to comparative, cross-national social policy research, Mabbett and Bolderson (1999) have identified three broad categories of comparative social research. At one end of the spectrum there are studies which test hypotheses using large-scale regression analysis of macro-economic and social indicators. This type of research is often based on a general model of development or modernization and utilizes quantitative data (for example Wilensky 1975; Alber 1983). While this approach enables the exploration of a large number of countries and seeks to avoid many of the cultural and linguistic problems involved in cross-national research, this type of research
has been criticized for failing fully to ‘provide the keys to understanding, explaining and interpreting’ (Ragin 1987: 6) and sacrifices depth for breadth. At the other end of the spectrum are micro-studies which are more likely to utilize in-depth, qualitative techniques and to emphasize cultural sensitivity and specificity, agency and reflexivity in the policy and research process.

Regime theory represents mid- or meso-level cross-national analysis and is exemplified in the work of Esping-Andersen (1990). His work has made a major contribution to cross-national research in that his analysis identifies the form and content of particular developed, western regimes, as well as the pattern of processes of social relations which have emerged in particular national regimes. The use of welfare state typologies in cross-national analysis has become extremely popular with few studies failing to make some connection between the countries under discussion and regime types. Reference to the various typologies has almost become a shorthand for taken-for-granted assumptions about the nature of welfare within the clusters of countries associated with the various regimes (Abrahamson 1999). Nevertheless, the approach has stimulated substantial debate regarding the ethnocentrism permeating cross-national research. It has also brought issues of gender and patriarchy to the fore in comparative analysis. Women are at the core of the reconstruction of the welfare state in that they form a large share of the population involved in the newly emerging (social) service industries and organizations, they form the majority of clients and they also do the servicing work in the ‘community’ (Balbo 1987). Thus, they have a central role to play in the construction and manipulation of the political and welfare agenda.

Each of the approaches mentioned above has its own strengths and weaknesses and conceptual tools through which ways of seeing, articulating and understanding social phenomena are articulated. There is an increasing recognition that cross-national research should be multi-method, utilizing a process of triangulation. Denzin (1978: 291) defines triangulation as ‘the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon’, thus potentially drawing on the strengths of each of the above categories to capture the complex patterns and outcomes of a ‘mixed economy of welfare’ and the role of non-state elements in welfare provision. It can also contribute to establishing a framework for overcoming the ‘false segregation’ between developed/developing, North/South or First/Third World countries in cross-national analysis.

The implications of these categorical distinctions between parts of the world are explored in Chapter 4. The chapter will establish how these distinctions came about and their relationship with theory construction, the research process and policy. Dissatisfaction with traditional development thinking and the Eurocentric paradigms applied to the countries of the South have provided an opportunity for re-evaluating analysis and research
strategies. This chapter will evaluate the potential of recent innovative research strategies for exposing the complexity and multifaceted nature of development, contributing to strategies for change, and facilitating cross-national comparative research across categorical boundaries.

**Fragmentation, differentiation and social exclusion**

The development of the welfare state in Western Europe following the Second World War was accompanied by expectations that social disadvantage would be eradicated. In Britain, full employment combined with universal access to education, health services and pensions were the centrepieces of post-war development and certainly contributed to an improvement in living standards for the bulk of the population. Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union also made great advances during the 1950s and 1960s, with life expectancy increasing from 58 to 66 years for men, and from 63 to 74 for women, and infant mortality rates reduced by half. Indeed, the majority of the population in Western Europe are still enjoying some of the highest living standards in the world, and there have been substantial, if fragmented, improvements in developing countries as discussed in Chapter 3.

However, more recent debates about disadvantage have been concerned with the changing face of poverty, patterns of social differentiation and in some cases a reversal of the progress in human development recorded in the 1960s. In the countries of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union as well as Sub-Saharan Africa, for example, social indicators indicate a decline in life expectancy and an increase in infant mortality rates as well as an increase in the numbers living in absolute poverty. Castells (1998) has attempted to identify and distinguish between the various types of social differentiation evident in contemporary society, some of which are outlined in Box I.1.

### Box I.1  Definitions of social differentiation

- **Inequality** refers to the differentiated appropriation of wealth (income and assets) by different individuals and social groups, relative to others.
- **Polarization** is a specific process of inequality that occurs when both the top and the bottom of the scale of income or wealth distribution grow faster than the middle, thus shrinking the middle and sharpening social differences between the two extreme segments of the population.
There are important differences between these categories but clearly there are links between them and there is also overlap. Castells (1998: 71) points out, ‘it is obvious that all these definitions (with powerful effects in categorizing populations, and defining social policies and resource allocations) are statistically relative and culturally defined, besides being politically manipulated’. However, they do begin to highlight and clarify the diversity of social differentiation. Box I.2 gives some indication of the increasing inequality between rich and poor and the uneven distribution of the opportunities of globalization.

Chapter 5 highlights the interaction between the nature and content of the ‘social contract’ and the drawing of the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion in Australia, Britain and Japan. It utilizes the concept of citizenship to undertake critical cross-national analysis. The focus of the chapter is on the social relations of gender, ethnicity and class to show how the boundaries of social rights vary from country to country, between different groups and change over time. All three countries have experienced a renegotiation of the boundaries of citizenship and a reassessment of the balance between rights and obligations. This chapter explores the implications of the reconstructed

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**Poverty** is an institutionally defined norm concerning a level of resources below which it is not possible to reach the living standards considered to be the minimum norm in a given society at a given time.

**Social exclusion** Castells (1998: 73) sees as a process ‘by which certain individuals and groups are systematically barred from access to positions that would enable them to [construct] an autonomous livelihood within the social standards framed by institutions and values in a given context’. By autonomous, what he means is ‘socially constrained autonomy’. Obviously a worker or self-employed person is not autonomous. They are reliant on an employer or on their customers or clients for their livelihood. So ‘socially constrained autonomy’ can be contrasted with people’s inability to organize their own lives within the constraints of the social structure because of their lack of access to resources that are deemed necessary to construct their limited autonomy.

**Perverse integration** refers to the criminal economy. By criminal economy Castells (1998) means income-generating activities that are normatively declared to be crime and which form part of the burgeoning global criminal economy which is characteristic of informational capitalism. Processes of social exclusion and the inadequacy of policies of social integration leads to perverse integration into the criminal economy.

Source: Castells 1998
The social contract as it coincides with the impact of economic restructuring and global integration.

There is evidence of increasing inequality and polarization in the distribution of wealth as the opportunities of globalization are unevenly distributed between nations and people. The final chapter in this book will consider the challenges for cross-national social policy research in terms of developing and operationalizing conceptual and theoretical frameworks which capture the multiple dimensions of these disparities within the newly emerging global political economy.

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**Box I.2 Increasing inequality and fragmentation**

- The world’s 200 richest people more than doubled their net worth in the four years to 1998, to more than $1 trillion. The assets of the top three billionaires are more than the combined gross national product (GNP) of all 43 least developed countries and their 600 million people.
- The distance between the richest and poorest countries was 3 to 1 in 1820, 35 to 1 in 1950 and 72 to 1 in 1992.
- In 1993, just ten countries accounted for 84 per cent of global research and development expenditure.
- Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries, with 19 per cent of the global population, have 76 per cent of global trade in goods and services, 58 per cent of foreign investment and 91 per cent of all internet users.

Source: United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) 1999