

19. Where to from here? Social policy research in future European societies

Mara A. Yerkes, Kenneth Nelson, and Rense Nieuwenhuis

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this edited volume, as set out in the introduction, was to take stock of major developments in social policy research from the last two decades and set a research agenda for the future. Three research questions were central to this stock-taking exercise: (1) What is the state of the art regarding research about social policy in Europe? (2) How has research about social policy in Europe evolved to this point? (3) Where should research about social policy in Europe be headed? Each of the chapters in the book has provided answers to these questions, showcasing the diversity of research on social policy across this multidisciplinary field.

In this concluding chapter, we reflect on future research about social policy in Europe. Based on this rich collection of chapters and their outline of the past, present, and future, we note three key developments. First, research about social policy in Europe is dynamic and shows a strong evolution. The goals, achievements, and challenges of specific and cross-cutting policy themes are in a constant state of flux, and the descriptions of these themes as covered in the book clearly illustrate 20 years of research progress.

Second, research about social policy in Europe clearly shifted away from broad-brush regime-based approaches common during the late 1980s and early 1990s towards analyses of single-policy programmes in narrower parts of the welfare state machinery. This gain in policy detail has provided a solid foundation for much of the current comparative social policy literature. Research includes both large-scale cross-country comparisons as well as more in-depth case studies of single countries, often thematically oriented towards specific policy (sub-)fields.

Third, research on social policy has become increasingly evaluative, whereby the focus is on the outcomes produced by various cash benefit programmes and services. We have therefore learned a great deal about who

benefits from social policy. As illustrated in several chapters in this book, European welfare states are, in several instances, associated with Matthew effects, particularly in relation to the provision of services (i.e., subsidized early childhood education and care, active labour market policy, health care, etc.). Matthew effects occur when social policies advantage those who need help the least (e.g., the middle class, higher-educated citizens), thereby reducing the equalizing effects of policies and potentially even widening the gap with more disadvantaged groups in society.

Where do we go from here? Given these three overarching developments in research on social policy in Europe, we offer three suggestions for moving forward. First, the diverse set of chapters in this book illustrate the need for research to broaden its view on social policy once again. The movement away from welfare regimes towards detailed comparisons of distinct areas of social policy in an increasingly thematic way has been fruitful. We now have detailed knowledge of how countries have organized individual policies, and how policies in separate areas of the welfare state have evolved over time. However, we believe that research now needs to make space for both specificity and breadth, accounting for the interplay between multiple policies, relating policy development to underlying social, political, and economic structures in society, and recognizing the multiplicity of citizens' identities.

Second, to ensure a robust future of research on social policy, we need greater theoretical development. We suggest social policy scholarship needs a more integrated understanding of policy outcomes, which is placed in the context of the origins of welfare reform. Increased attention is therefore needed for driving forces of policy change, which used to characterize much of social policy research a few decades ago. Specifically, we need to know more about how institutional designs shape future policy developments, for instance mediated by the outcomes they produce. Institutional structures may encourage or discourage new forms of social policymaking, or (re)define our views about future social problems that need to be addressed by policy. Essentially, we argue for research that links determinants of institutions and institutional change to the outcomes produced by the welfare state, as well as attention to the processes underlying these relationships and how these relationships evolve over time. From this perspective, social policy forms an intermediate variable (or factor) between cause (i.e., partisan politics, deindustrialization, population ageing, etc.) and effect (socio-economic stratification, gender equality, interest group formation, etc.). Note that cause and effect will shift place in the causal order over time, whereas the position of social policy as a mediating variable stays constant.

Third, and finally, we see the need to further strengthen and exploit the multidisciplinary nature of our research community, as demonstrated in the various chapters throughout this book. Discovering new trade-offs or comple-

mentarities between different types of policies (and beyond) is a challenging endeavour that can hardly be achieved by following the state of the art in single academic disciplines (like economics, political science, or sociology). Fully understanding the complex relationship between causes and consequences of social policy (our second recommendation) also likely requires insights from multiple disciplines. The multidisciplinary character of the ESPAnet community and the scholarship it represents is a crucial advantage that we should cultivate and nourish in this regard. In the remainder of this concluding chapter, we elaborate on these three recommendations, using illustrative examples from the book.

BROADENING THE SCOPE OF RESEARCH TO INTERSECTIONALITY AND POLICY INTERPLAYS

Our first suggestion is that as social policy scholars, we need to broaden our view to incorporate intersectionality more thoroughly at the individual level as well as the interplay of policies at the institutional level. Intersectionality requires social policy researchers to be cautious of the fact that individuals often have complex identities and, crucially, are affected by multiple policies at the same time. Understanding these complex relationships at the institutional level therefore requires looking beyond a single potential source of (dis)advantage, such as those associated with (low) income or educational attainment. As discussed by Daly and León (Chapter 2, this volume), research on care policy shows, for example, how the increased outsourcing of care responsibilities in a neoliberal market context creates social and economic polarization among women along socio-economic, racial/ethnic, and citizenship lines. Similarly, adopting an intersectional approach to analyses of old age pensions and ageing policies will help to illuminate the complex interactions between gender, socio-economic status, caregiving responsibilities, and labour market inequalities, as discussed by Ebbinghaus and Möhring (Chapter 6, this volume).

Intersectionality is not limited to understanding interrelated factors at the individual level. As highlighted by Knijn (Chapter 11, this volume), the increase in intersectional research on gender and social policy links the individual and institutional levels, with the potential for conceptualizing differences between groups as well as contestations that emerge from this heterogeneity. We must therefore do better in terms of analysing not only the interrelationship of factors at individual/family/household levels, but also at institutional/social policy levels, as well as how these different levels connect.

This interplay between different types of social policies is highlighted by multiple chapters in the book. A clear example can be found in Dewilde and Haffner's overview of research on housing policy (Chapter 5, this volume), which not only concerns housing-related welfare benefits and services, but

also tenure structures, housing finance, and housing construction. Even more encompassing, they argue that people's housing conditions may also be related to complementarities between what is typically considered housing policy and other welfare state policies. Similarly, Wendt (Chapter 4, this volume) argues for an integrated approach for research on public health that integrates multiple policy fields beyond health care, including family policy, the educational system, and major programmes for income redistribution. Policy interplays should also be part and parcel of any ambitious attempt to understand how social policies and the welfare state affect poverty and income inequality, as noted by Cantillon in Chapter 7. Similarly, Bonoli (Chapter 8, this volume) raises awareness for the combination of different policy instruments in designing effective social investment strategies.

The integrated approach to the study of social policy that we advocate in this concluding chapter is not new. Policy interplays have been addressed before but have not yet become mainstream in research. Moreover, the connections between policies that have been studied often remain within particular policy sub-fields, such as the interplay between different labour market policies, or the well-documented gap between parental leave duration and the starting age of childcare. We believe that there are many virtues of situating individual social policy programmes in a larger institutional context and analysing how policies interact. Essentially, it brings out the complexity of the regime literature that used to characterize our field, without losing sight of the policy details that may also make a difference. The potential of an integrated approach to the study of social policy in generating new path-breaking findings has yet to be demonstrated. Nonetheless, we expect that the approach will increase scholarly understanding of how different types of policies strengthen or weaken each other. It will also help to unpack competing or complementing policy aims and ideas shaping these outcomes.

Our call for greater attention to the interplay of individual social policies comes with at least two qualifications. First, the social policy landscape has become increasingly complex. Policymaking takes place not only at the national level; the introduction of new policies, their governance, and implementation occurs at local, regional, national, and supra-national levels. Interaction within and between these levels can have important implications for social policy. As shown by De la Porte and Madama (Chapter 9, this volume), regulation at the supra-national level of the European Union increasingly affects national redistributive policies in the fields of pensions, health care, unemployment, and labour market regulation. Yet at the same time, even within single regions, vast differences between policy approaches can be found, as is demonstrated by the research on family policy, pensions, and poverty across countries in the Central and Eastern European region (Chapter 10 by Aidukaite and Navicke, this volume).

Second, the interplay between social policies is necessarily linked to broader political, economic, social, and lately also environmental processes, which is evident not in the least by Hvinden and Schoyen's account of social policy research in relation to climate change (Chapter 15, this volume). Similarly, technological change and specifically the digitalization of public services changes the very mechanisms through which the welfare state operates. The changed and automated nature of welfare provision may also reinforce existing, and bring with it new, cleavages in society (Chapter 16 by van Gerven, this volume).

Scholarly attempts to map developments in separate fields of social policy and the increased focus on policy outcomes have, to some extent, made us lose sight – it would seem – of these broader configurations. At the very least, we need to do more to connect policy evaluative research to the wider context in which policies operate. While the shift away from the regime approach towards more detailed accounts of policy and outcomes in separate parts of the welfare state has paved the way for innovative research, we now encourage the scholarly community to complement these analyses by asking how individual policies are interlinked, how they combine to affect living conditions, attitudes, and behaviour, as well as how they relate to the wider contexts of policymaking.

We realize that our recommendation may appear paradoxical. To an important extent, this book itself has been organized based on specific areas of policy. As described in the individual chapters of this book, research about social policy in Europe has become increasingly adept at describing in great depth the complexity of individual policy programmes (or types of policies). These descriptions showcase intricate policy designs, leading to both intended and unintended outcomes that are typically difficult to pinpoint using holistic regime-based approaches. However, we think it is necessary to step back and analyse how individual policies fit within the larger welfare state machinery and other institutional, social, economic, and cultural contexts relevant to the functioning of the welfare state. To use an old and probably overused saying, with an increasingly narrower focus on specific social policy fields, we risk failing to see the forest for the trees. Research on social policy needs to develop strategies to deal with an increasing demand within academia and among policymakers for institutional detail, without losing sight of how the functioning of policies are interrelated and linked to wider societal structures.

THEORIZING SOCIAL POLICY

If our first recommendation presents a paradox, our second recommendation offers a solution: theoretical advancement. Given the multifaceted nature of what we study, it is easy to get lost in institutional details and fail to observe

the wider structures that ultimately determine how policies should be judged. Theory may encourage us to analyse policies from different viewpoints, and provide a deeper understanding of the ways in which social policies shape our lives. Let us return to the Matthew effects of many social policies (particularly in the provision of services) observed in several chapters of the book and highlighted above. Narrowly conceived, (often) unintended and (commonly perceived) pervasive outcomes may be considered to reduce the effectiveness of policies in achieving equality. Yet, a broader theoretical perspective would suggest that if larger shares of the population (who may need it less) receive benefits from a policy, this may affect popular support for the welfare state and make future expansions of policy possible, which also benefits the poor. Considered as such, Matthew effects in some parts of social policy may not necessarily be a solely negative development that should always be avoided. Theory would, in this case, encourage us to see the problem of Matthew effects in a different light, and perhaps judge these effects against possible spill-over effects in more pro-poor areas of social policy.

Contemporary research about social policy in Europe excels at describing institutional arrangements in specific parts of the welfare state, and relating these descriptions to various outcomes (i.e., the effects of social policies). However, to move beyond descriptions to a deeper understanding of the effects of social policy for individuals, families, and society, we need to invest in theoretical development. The role of theory is noted in several chapters of the book and seems to be more developed in some fields of social policy compared to others. Whereas Van Lancker and Zagel (Chapter 3, this volume) explicitly discuss the absence of deeper theoretical engagement in much of contemporary research on family policy, Daly and León (Chapter 2, this volume) call for more research applying a capability approach in care policy. In Chapter 7, Cantillon argues for a multilayered understanding of poverty that conceptualizes social policies across time, space, and scale. Notably, policy interplays form a specific part of this schema. As noted above, the intersectional approach described by Knijn (Chapter 11, this volume) provides further motivation for theoretical advancements in this direction.

Without theory, we risk a myopic viewpoint that insufficiently asks questions about institutional diversity, interplays, and outcomes. Theories may be formulated for different reasons and at different levels of abstraction. In particular, we believe that theoretical advancement is needed concerning recursive processes and the forms of two-way causality that characterizes much of social policymaking. Under such conditions, there is no single direction of change, as cause and effect constantly shift positions over time. This dynamic perspective on social policymaking with its close focus on mutually enforcing processes carries great potential in terms of identifying and better understanding why policies work in some areas but not in others. Some of the chapters

in this book touch upon this topic and provide promising starting points. Van Oorschot, Laenen, Roosma, and Meuleman (Chapter 13, this volume) point to the reciprocal relationship between social policy and public opinion, whereas Bonoli (Chapter 8, this volume) provides insights in relation to the political economy of active social policies. Along similar lines, Breidahl, Hedegaard, and Seibel (Chapter 17, this volume) show how migration is not only affected by the welfare state, but also helps to reshape it. Dewilde and Haffner (Chapter 5, this volume) raise the concern that home ownership, and the mortgage policies promoting it, may compensate inequalities due to declining wages, but may also undermine support for redistribution.

Recursive processes further relate to welfare state institutional legacies, and how policy choices at critical junctures in the past affect policymaking today (see Chapter 12 by Clasen and Clegg, this volume). Essentially, what is at stake are the feedback effects of policies on outcomes, and vice versa. Theoretical advancement along these lines is also directly related to the broader question of who defines what a social problem is, and which social problems are perceived to be important enough to be addressed by social policy. This power of definition is extensively discussed in the literature on gender (in)equality, as described by Knijn (Chapter 11, this volume), but applies to social policy in general. If citizens in general do not agree with the definition of social problems, and how these are addressed by social policies, this absence of recognition could further contribute to the crisis of political legitimacy in contemporary welfare states, as described by Greve and Paster (Chapter 18, this volume). We posit that linking policy outcome feedback effects to the interplay between policies and the intersection of individual identities with attention for who is defining the problem, and how, will provide challenging but fruitful areas for theoretical advancements in research about social policy in Europe.

MULTIDISCIPLINARITY

Our final recommendation is to strengthen one of the core characteristics of the ESPAnet community, and research about social policy in Europe more generally: its multidisciplinary. Multidisciplinary is about the need for multiple perspectives on a given issue to allow for a broad understanding; it does not mean everyone has to become interdisciplinary scholars. Several chapters in the book illustrate how a multidisciplinary perspective could move the field forward. In relation to pensions, for example, Ebbinghaus and Möhring (Chapter 6, this volume) highlight the varying ways in which demographers, economists, political scientists, and sociologists contribute discipline-specific perspectives to understand the complex interplay between demographic ageing, driving forces of pension reform, and the outcomes of changing

pension systems. Combined insights from two or more of these disciplines (e.g., economics and sociology) can offer balanced views on the financial sustainability of pensions while accounting for an integrated life-course perspective. On the topic of climate change, multidisciplinary approaches are needed to address the combined challenge of social and ecological sustainability, as emphasized by Hvinden and Schoyen (Chapter 15, this volume).

Multidisciplinarity certainly brings with it potential theoretical and methodological challenges. Disciplines often differ in their conceptualization of key terms, as highlighted by the chapter on care policy by Daly and León (Chapter 2, this volume). While some research succeeds in taking an interdisciplinary approach that integrates multiple disciplinary perspectives, the existence of different disciplinary conceptualizations is not necessarily a disadvantage. Varying conceptualizations can offer avenues for future research, as shown by Wendt in the health-care literature (Chapter 4, this volume). Approaching health as a combined individual and population health issue – in essence integrating epidemiology, medical sciences, sociology, public health, and social policy – is likely to move the field of health-care policy several steps forward.

Conceptual differences across disciplines may, however, create methodological challenges, with disciplines differing with respect to the use of quantitative and qualitative approaches for measuring concepts, and the specific methodological tools applied. Nonetheless, as Ferragina and Deeming (Chapter 14, this volume) show, research on social policy, particularly related to comparative analyses, offers room for multiple approaches. Despite the growth in large-N, quantitative studies, small-scale country case studies, generally qualitative in approach, are still prominent in research about social policy in Europe. Their analysis of nearly 20 years of comparative policy analysis in the *Journal of European Social Policy* suggests, moreover, that few social policy scholars are using multiple or mixed methods. In our view, future research on social policy relying on multidisciplinary approaches that combine or use multiple methods offers significant opportunities for moving the field forward.

CONCLUSION

With our contemporary and highly specialized understanding of the welfare state, it is difficult to appreciate how much has been learned during the last 20 years – and thus how superficial our understanding of European social policy perhaps was. Trying to look ahead another 20 years, a number of major challenges can be foreseen for European welfare states, creating new opportunities and needs for social policy research. To start, it is unclear how long the social and economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic will last. Recent major challenges, like the Great Recession that started in 2007/2008, shaped social policy research for at least a decade. The need for research on the role

of social policies in the pandemic and the amelioration of the consequences of the pandemic will likely remain for at least a decade as well. Moreover, the response to climate change will, in all likelihood, require a fundamental shift in work, production, and consumption in attempts to make the transition to net-zero emissions socially equitable, a question that still remains largely unexplored in research. With Europe's population still ageing, significant challenges also remain that call into question the financial sustainability of European welfare states.

European welfare states will likely also face unforeseen, far-reaching challenges in the next decades that are difficult to predict today. However, we believe that social policy research is well positioned to address these challenges, informing policymakers and the public about the immediate problems at hand, bringing clarity about which policies work and for whom, and showing which alternative policy solutions may be available. This is particularly the case in an increasingly integrated European Union, where countries attempt to learn about and from social policy approaches in other member states.

As demonstrated by the chapters in this book, the vivid landscape of social policy research is not afraid of addressing new and sometimes inconvenient questions about the role, functioning, and outcomes of collective action, irrespective of whether it is organized at the level of the state, market, or family. We believe that the recommendations formulated in this concluding chapter on the future orientations of social policy research in Europe will further strengthen the relevance and significance of social policy research, for academia, policymaking, and the general public alike. Researching interplays between policies and their connection to the wider society provides insights into how social policy is embedded in national contexts, which will help us assess the transferability of policy solutions from one European country to the next. Theorizing social outcomes in relation to institutional change and its driving forces will provide policy guidance, not only in relation to the challenges raised by the recurring crises of the welfare state and social policy, but also in the context of new challenges that have yet to be studied empirically. To examine these complex challenges from a diversity of perspectives, the multidisciplinary and multimethod character of research on social policy in Europe is perhaps the greatest asset to be used and fostered by our academic community.