NARRATIVES OF KNOWING IN SOCIAL POLICY

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Introduction

In the context of discussions taking place between the Social Policy Association and the Development Studies Association[2], and in preparation for a panel discussion that took place at the 2013 annual Development Studies Association conference in Birmingham, we were asked to apply our minds to the nature of the *narratives of knowing in social policy*. The intention is to compare and contrast these, using a similar paper being prepared by colleagues in Development Studies[3].

Narratives of knowing require us to focus on methods, or at least this was the focus of Andrew Abbott's lecture on the "the vicissitudes of methods"[4].

In introductory lectures on '*What is social policy?*' we do not tend to dwell on methods and in depicting the nature of the field of study that is social policy, we think that it may be most difficult to start with methods. It is not that research excellence and the methodology of social policy has not been subject to controversial discussions in recent years. Indeed, there has been a lively debate within the UK social policy community about the peer-review process in the wake of the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise[5], the notion of evidence-based policy making[6] and the principle of generalisation and causal explanations in 'effective policy research'[7].

However, it would feel much more 'natural' to compare our distinctive journals, discourses, skills and knowledge.

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[2] Devine, J., Kühner, S. and Nakray, K. (2015) 'Meeting Emerging Global Policy Challenges: Positioning Social Policy Between Development and Growth?', *Journal of International and Comparative Social Policy*, 31(2), 95-99.

[3] Copestake, J. (2015) 'Whither development studies? Reflections on its relationship with social policy'. *Journal of International and Comparative Social Policy*, 31(2), 100–113.

[4] Lecture at the ESRC International Research Methods Conference 2012 http://www.ncrm.ac.uk/TandE/video/RMF2012/filmed.php?id=38333bc.

[5] McKay, S. (2012) 'Social Policy Excellence – Peer Review or Metrics? Analyzing the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise in Social Work and Social Policy and Administration', *Social Policy & Administration*, 46(5), 526-543.

[6] Byrne, D. (2011) *Applying Social Science: The Role of Social Research in Politics, Policy and Practice*, Bristol: Policy Press.

[7] Spicker, P. (2011) 'Generalisation and Phronesis: Rethinking the Methodology of Social Policy', *Journal of Social Policy*, 40(1), 1-19; McKay, S. (2011) 'Response 1: Scientific Method in Social Policy Research Is Nota Lost Cause', *same issue*; Fitzpatrick, T. (2011) 'Response 2: Social Science as Phronesis? The Potential Contradictions of a Phronetic Social Policy', *same issue*.

Why not compare our ideological perspectives (critical and committed; possibly Left wing)?

It would be much less tendentious to start with:

- the <u>subject</u> of study – for example: the institutions of the welfare state, the worlds of welfare capitalism, the mixed economy of welfare;

- the <u>intellectual preoccupations</u> or dominant <u>concepts</u> in social policy – for example: need, poverty, impairment, disability, health, sickness, crime, deviancy, adequacy, well-being, security, equality, equity, dependency, care;

- the <u>historical identity</u> of Social Policy as an <u>interdisciplinary field of inquiry</u> which draws on all social sciences and an expanding scope of policy areas (e.g. environment, transport), its roots in *Social Administration*, its changing identification with Economics, Sociology and Politics (see below), but also the challenges posed by new HE programmes in Public Management, Health Economics, Criminology <u>and</u> International Development Studies.[8]

As David Donnison said in his inaugural address at the London School of Economics:

"We are concerned with an ill-defined but recognisable territory: the development of collective action for the advancement of social welfare. Our job is to identify and clarify problems within this territory. To throw light upon this - drawing light from any discipline that appears to be relevant - and contributing when we can to the solution of problems."[9]

We got interested in this discussion because we sensed that International Development Studies was beginning to discover the welfare state. Both development academics and agencies were becoming interested in social protection – rather than previously focussing on basic health and education. It was being realised that the benefits of economic growth in the developing world could not be distributed without institutions to distribute them. Social policy has something to contribute from long experience of analysing social protection policies. Not necessarily because we have a particular <u>narrative of knowing</u>.

Indeed, as soon as one begins to claim a dominant methodological narrative for social policy one can hear social policy colleagues clamouring in protest! But here goes.

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[8] See e.g. the series of short articles compiled under the heading 'Where next for Social Policy', *Policy World – Newsletter of the Social Policy Association*, Autumn 2004.
[9] Donnison, D. V. (1962) The Development of Social Administration, London: Bell; see also: ftp://78.153.208.68/bkp/ipa/PDF/The_development_of_social_administration.pdf.

The methodological paradigm of social policy

Social science enquiry devoted to social welfare began with quantitative analysis – the accumulation of numerical facts. The data was derived initially from administrative sources (for example by Chadwick and the 1832 Poor Law Commissioners in the first half of the 19th century). Then later, population data collected in the census (from 1801) and through the registration of births, deaths and marriages 1836 became the key sources (for example for the great Sanitary Inquiries 1842 by Chadwick (again)).

Henry Mayhew's journalistic case studies gave way by the end of the 19th century to surveys of the population - in Booth's massive studies of the London poor and the more systematic survey by BS Rowntree of the poor in York in 1899. Rowntree did not trust sampling theory and did not use a sample until his third survey in 1950. But Rowntree set a framework, a model, and sample surveys became the bread and butter of social policy researchers well before the Second World War. The "Blue book sociology" of the Webbs was also highly reliant on quantification and administrative data for the Royal Commission on the Poor Law. Indeed it could be said that their analysis of data helped to destroy the case study based felicific calculus of the Charity Organisation Society and its academic supporters. The Liberal reforms 1905-1914 were based on administrative and survey data.

The scope of the state and the amount of social data it collected grew in both WW1 and WW2.

After WW2 when social policy escaped from social work education and grew as an academic subject, concepts and understandings changed and developed (for example mixed economy of welfare, relative poverty) and we have certainly been borrowing ideas from:

- **Economics.** Social policy influences economic performance and is a tool of macro and micro economic management, and currently, austerity. We are especially interested in labour supply and demand. The notion of human capital and social investments are common interests and tools of economic evaluation – effectiveness/efficiency common to us both.

- **Politics**. Especially the policy making process; the roles of different actors in social policy making; power resources; the impact of constitutional structures and past social policy decisions; and from political theory, an interest in justice, rights, equity.

- **Sociology**. Perhaps social policy was once closer to sociology than it is today. But sociology provides us with analytical concepts - class, status, role, gender, race, families, groups,

institutions, professions, cities. We have a shared interest in pathologies such as deviancy and suicide.

However since WW2 the quantitative empirical traditions have continued. Richard Titmuss worked with Inland Revenue statistics in his *Income Distribution and Social Change*. Abel Smith and Townsend rediscovered poverty through the secondary analysis of Ministry of Labour data. Peter Townsend employed survey research in *the Last Refuge*, *the Family Life of Old People* and in *Poverty in the United Kingdom*. The data available to scholars grew with the development of large government surveys and the academic community complemented them with their own surveys (for example at York we did the first surveys of lone parents and absent fathers).

To this day the big centres of social policy research CASE at LSE, SPRU at York, NATCEN, Bristol, ISER at Essex, Oxford are mainly engaged in survey research or the secondary analysis of surveys or administrative data.

So, one could claim with some confidence that the dominant lineage of social policy methods has been the quantitative analysis of data. One can also be doubtful that Andrew Abbott is correct in his depiction of lineage generations – dominant methodologies that wax and wane, colligisation, generational paradigms that come and go. Social policy has maintained a pretty strong positivist perspective over time. Indeed, one could argue that it has been linear rather than cyclical.

Thereby, the use of quantitative methods has changed enormously – as a result of computers, analytical software and learning from a range of other more mathematical orientated disciplines, including the natural sciences. Research design has changed: more longitudinal, comparative, and even experimental. Analysis is becoming increasingly more sophisticated: multivariate, multilevel, spatial, time series, generational. The whole field of comparative and international analysis has opened up with international data sets at the macro level, provided by international organisations like the International Labour Organisation (ILO), Eurostat, Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), World Bank, International Monetary Fund, Asian Development Bank, and common micro level sample surveys like the Luxembourg Income Survey and the EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (just to name a few) becoming increasingly accessible.

Naturally, it goes without saying that there have always been distinguished historians working in social policy too. Conceptually driven social policy analysis is as important today as it has always been. There are sociologists, some of them applying constructionist and interpretative methods to

the field of social welfare research. Driven by proponents in the US (and increasingly continental Europe) there has been a noticeable resurgence of historical case study methods using process tracing and other small-N multi-source methods to capture complex conjunctural classifications and causation. There have been recent attempts to make these innovative approaches more relevant to policy makers and practitioners undertaking applied policy analyses such as policy evaluations[10]. Qualitative methods – semi-structured interviews, observation and focus groups are all employed in the research of social policyists, often but not exclusively as precursors to the collection and analysis of quantitative data. Ethno-methodologists, discourse analysts and other interpretative methods have been notable for their absence, rather than their presence – although the picture is slowly changing, possibly due to the fact that social policy students are more routinely introduced to these methods.

Not least, there has been a drive to move beyond epistemological dichotomies in undergraduate and postgraduate social research methods training, which has already had some effect. Mixed methodologies tend to be overrepresented – in relative terms – in PG streams of academic conferences and one senses that bigger research proposals have tended to become more multi-method in an attempt to make use of advantages that both qualitative and quantitative techniques bring.

In order to substantiate the above observations and inspired by a similar exercise by Krueger and Lewis-Beck for the *American Political Science Association[11]*, we conducted a small survey of research methods employed in published articles in the *Journal of Social Policy* during the period covered in the 2014 Research Excellence Framework (2008-2013). The choice of journal is admittedly arbitrary, although *JSP* is the main journal owned by the UK Social Policy Association and widely considered the leading social policy journal in the UK[1213].

The emerging picture is one of methodological diversity and makes it difficult to speak of one dominant paradigm in social policy research. As always in such an exercise, the classifications in *Table 1* are often not clear cut (the dividing line between conceptual policy analysis and multi-

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[10] See e.g. Hudson, J. and Kühner, S. (2013) Qualitative Comparative Analysis and Applied Public Policy Analysis: New Applications of Innovative Methods (Introduction to Special Issue), *Policy & Society*, http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/journal/aip/14494035.

[11] Krueger, J. S. and Lewis-Beck, M. S. (2008) 'Is OLS Dead?', The Political Methodologist – Newsletter of the Political Methodology Section, American Political Science Association, Volume 15, Number 2, Winter 2008.

[12] The *Journal of Social Policy* currently has an impact factor of 1,075, which is slightly lower than its European counterpart, the *Journal of European Social Policy*, 1,644, but higher than other UK-based social policy journals.

[13] Initially, we intended to expand this survey to include additional journals with close affiliation to the UK Social Policy Association, namely *Social Policy & Society*, *Social Policy & Administration*, *Global Social Policy* and the *Journal of International and Comparative Social Policy* and even outputs by the already mentioned big national social policy research centres CASE at LSE, SPRU at York, NATCEN, Bristol, ISER at Essex, Oxford.

source, synchronic or diachronic case-studies is particularly difficult to draw and many regression analysis also contain descriptive statistics and even principal component or factor analysis). Still, it is certainly very interesting that conceptual policy and case study analysis together were utilised in the majority of surveyed articles, 17.6% and 19.5% respectively. About 1 in every 5 surveyed articles did not include a separate description of research methodology.

Table 1. Research methods employed in *Journal of Social Policy*, 37(1)-42(4), 2008-2013, *N=210*

	Raw frequency	*Percent Frequency*
Conceptual policy analysis/commentary (i.e. no methods section)	**37**	**17.6**
Case studies (single or multi source; synchronic or diachronic)	**41**	**19.5**
Systematic literature reviews	**1**	**0.5**
Qualitative	**46**	**21.9**
Semi-structured interviews	26	12.4
Expert interviews	6	2.9
Focus groups	2	1.0
Document/discourse/conversation analysis	9	4.3
Participant observation	3	1.4
Quantitative (macro and/or micro)	**68**	**32.4**
Descriptive statistics (frequencies, confidence intervals, cross tabulations, chi squares, line and column charts)	17	8.1
Classification (principal component or factor analysis)	2	1.0
OLS regression (simple and/or multivariate)	16	7.6
Logistic regression (binary or multinomial)	14	6.7
More sophisticated regression (ordinal, probit, time series)	8	3.9
Event history analysis	4	1.9
Multi-level and structural equation models	6	2.9
Microsimulation	1	0.5
Randomised control trials	**1**	**0.5**
Mixed methodologies	**11**	**5.2**
Multi-method ethnographic fieldwork	**4**	**1.9**
Qualitative comparative analysis	**1**	**0.5**
Total	*210*	*100.0*

There were 46 articles with a qualitative research design, 21.9%, a majority of which used semi-structured interviews typically with benefit recipients or service users. Expert interviews were less frequent, 2.9%, possibly driven by on-going discussions on how ethical considerations, i.e. confidentiality of easily identifiable policy makers, should be handled in these instances. What may be surprising is the very limited use of systematic literature reviews, focus groups and participant observation, which is uncharacteristic of other fields of inquiry in the social sciences.

As for the 32.4% of quantitatively informed pieces of research, there are indeed signs of increased sophistication of techniques – 15.5% of articles use sophisticated statistical techniques such as ordinal, probit, time-series, multi-level and event history analysis, which are usually not covered in taught PG-level research methods training. Strikingly, the number of papers using basic descriptive, cross-sectional OLS or logistic regression is almost identical, between 6.7% and 8.1% respectively, whereas randomised control trials and qualitative comparative analysis have been almost non-existent. Analysis of large-N micro-level data sets predominantly use logistic regression methods, either binary or multinomial, whereas exploration of state-level aggregated data still often relies on linear additive OLS regression techniques.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we would depict social policy as: multidisciplinary, applied – i.e. seeking to address real-world social problems, empirical, evaluative, prescriptive, not just about public policy – i.e. mixed economy, and ultimately concerned with distribution[14]. Social policy is increasingly interested in the policy process, analytical, comparative and international. At the same time, social policy is under various pressures, indicated by concerns about the fall in the number of (home) students across the UK. Besides merely commenting, evaluating and informing changing social and policy trends, it has been directly affected by new public management and privatisation, changing social attitudes and calls – across the political spectrum – for new post-industrial (investive) welfare settlements. It may be that a more global discourse on welfare and the welfare state is exactly what is needed to rejuvenate the subject and help it move beyond the current permeating paradigm of fiscal austerity in the high-income world.

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[14] Titmuss, R. H. (1913) *Income Distribution and Social Change*, London: Allen and Unwin.