

# Chapter 1

## Studying Social Policy

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### Introduction

Many students come to social policy with a rather sketchy idea of what it entails. Some may have covered particular aspects of welfare such as ‘education’ or ‘the family’ as part of previous sociological studies, while others may have engaged with some of the more applied areas within a health and social care framework. Others still, with no previous experience of the subject may embark on courses either because social policy study is a requirement of their particular course of study (for example on a health studies degree) or because it sounded like an interesting option. The range of directions from which students arrive at the study of social policy is illustrative of the beauty of the subject. You can be sure that even if the term ‘social policy’ has never previously crossed your academic radar, that you have been exposed to it throughout your entire life. From Child Benefit to GCSEs, GP services to the care of elderly relatives, social policy impacts on our security, development and happiness. However, social policy also touches our lives in more unexpected ways such that areas as diverse as food consumption, discipline within families and global economic competitiveness are all matters of social policy. This chapter will examine further some of the issues, concerns and topics with which a student of social policy can expect to become acquainted in the course of her or his studies. Rather than beginning with an excursion into the ‘meaning’ or ‘definition’ of social policy, which tends to construct artificial and restrictive subject boundaries, the aim of this chapter is to demonstrate the depth and breadth of enquiry, what is possible rather than what the limitations or boundaries are.

## The Individual and Society

### Box 1.1 Daniel: What is to be done?

Daniel has been described in his local paper as a 'one boy crime wave'. At the age of 15 his offences already include truancy, vandalism, criminal damage, assault, assaulting a police officer and affray. It is reported that he has made the lives of members of the community in which he lives a misery. In addition to the offences with which he has been charged, he is reported as being abusive to his neighbours, intimidating local residents as part of a local gang and being involved in bullying at school where his level of educational achievement is well below his peers.

Daniel's father, who works away a lot of the time, believes that his behaviour is just teenage high spirits, while his mother who has a serious heart condition and spends much of her time travelling to and from hospital admits that Daniel seems to dislike authority but is at a loss as to how to change his behaviour. Daniel himself can't see that he has any problems except boredom and the unwelcome attention of the adults around him.

What should be done with about a boy like Daniel? At a personal level it might be hard to find the desire to do anything *for* him since his behaviour might suggest that he is not a particularly sympathetic character. However, his actions clearly have an impact on the lives and well-being of those with whom he comes into contact as well as affecting his own future. Popular and ideological responses to a 'problem' like Daniel can be found in the pages of newspapers and in the speeches of politicians. There are regular calls for the reintroduction of national service in the tabloid press for example, while the present Labour government has embarked on a project of 'responsibilization' through various educational, family and criminal justice policy measures. In a rather unlikely contrast, David Cameron, as Leader of the Conservative Party, once advocated a more understanding and caring approach towards young people, which was captured in the sound bite 'hug a hoody'. In considering Daniel and the challenges he represents for social policy, it is helpful to separate considerations into different levels of analysis which in some ways correspond to a timeframe – what should be done in the short, medium and long term, but also illustrate the depth and breadth of the issues that arise in relation to a single individual's place in society. In this way it is possible to examine the relationship between 'subjects' of social policy (as both individuals and members of social groups), the institutions and policy measures set up to respond to them and also how these fit into a wider picture of human development.

At the meta or macro level, the framework for a societal response to any particular problem, and in fact the ways in which issues come to be seen as problems in the first place, depends very much on underlying visions of the 'good society', the kind of

social world we aim to shape. These visions also reflect our beliefs in relation to human nature, whether we view humans as essentially good, or altruistic, but corrupted by circumstance, or whether we are essentially bad or self-interested and restrain our unpleasant tendencies due to the existence of social sanctions. This of course also requires consideration of the relationship between structure and agency in human action. Debate around the relative importance of environment and our 'place' in the social structure (our class, gender or ethnic group for example) and our capacity to determine our own progress (our individual agency) within the social world, is not necessarily polarized into an argument that we are *either* passive victims of circumstance *or* free agents. Even Marx, concerned to stress the impact of social structure, recognized that as individuals we 'act', but not, he suggested, in circumstances of our own choosing. At the individual or micro level, it is impossible to measure accurately the extent to which level of income or education, or standard of housing or health influence what a person chooses to do with her or his life, but there is plenty of evidence to show that these factors do influence the scope of choices to be made – people's life chances. Poor health measured as lower life expectancy for example, is more likely to be found amongst people with low incomes. At one level, lower life expectancy amongst one social group as compared to another is itself an effect of structural conditions (social stratification in this case). However, once analysis shifts to the specific causes of poor health and early death (environmental factors, diet, smoking and so on) the debate between those who emphasize 'structure' in the form of unequal access to the labour market, health services and education for example, compared to those who prefer more individualized explanations around health behaviour, becomes much more complex and heated. Headlines such as 'Obese told: "it's up to you"' (*Observer* 18.01.04) reflect the increasing dominance of individualized explanations of social problems and their influence on government responses. At the same time however, the tacit recognition that humans (especially children) are not necessarily free agents is also clear in more recent moves to ban the television advertising of junk food during the hours when children could be watching. Thus in this example where social class differences in obesity can be demonstrated, there is a clear case for examining the relevance of food consumption under advanced capitalism (at the meta level) rather than simply opting to shift the blame for ill-health onto sufferers themselves (focusing on the micro level).

A second point to make in relation to the significance of meta and micro level questions around structure and agency relates to one of the core considerations in the study of social policy which is the distribution of resources or 'who gets what'. David Donnison (1975) has argued that this distributional concern is what makes a policy 'social': 'What distinguishes a policy as "social" is ... the fact that it deals with the distribution of resources, opportunities and life chances between different groups and categories of people'. At the meta level again, analysis concerns the principles which underpin the patterns and processes of distribution and of course, questions of 'fairness' are at the centre of debate. Views on the fairness of inequalities depend very much on the extent to which these inequalities are considered to be the products of individual choices or to result from forces beyond individual control. For example, a person may have sufficient command over resources to participate in

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the property market but rather than buying a house may choose to rent a caravan because she or he prefers a more transient lifestyle. Most people would find this kind of housing inequality perfectly acceptable. If the caravan dweller was restricted to this form of housing because she or he did not earn enough to participate in the property market this would begin to raise questions around individual choice and the reasons why it might not be enjoyed in the same way by all individuals. However, if the caravan dweller's situation was replicated in a number of other cases then the fairness of the general distribution of housing and employment would clearly be more questionable still. A more detailed discussion of the significance of 'personal troubles' compared to 'public issues' can be found in Robert Page's chapter in May et al. (2001), but what should be clear is that in attempting to seek out policy solutions to social issues, an exclusive focus on the individual can never provide a sufficient basis for action. To return to Daniel, our views on his actions and how society should respond to them also depend on the extent to which he is considered to be a product of his environment (has he been damaged in some way through his early life experience?) or an essentially bad person (and can we say this for definite given that he is still legally a child?). In fact, in the area of crime and criminal justice policy, there is a much greater focus on individual agency and, while an individual's particular emotional circumstances are sometimes considered in mitigation for crimes committed, public issues such as unemployment are not. Subjective, micro-level considerations are also made in relation to the treatment of individuals such as Daniel. The societal response to his behaviour depends on an assessment of his needs (for anger management or literacy classes for example) balanced against the needs of society (the need for others to feel secure and protected). These needs can be conflicting and are not necessarily recognized by those who are viewed as possessing them. Daniel may not accept that he needs to control his aggressive behaviour for example. Consideration of the societal response to social problems and the individuals and groups at whom they are targeted requires us to focus our analysis on the 'meso' level.

At the 'meso' level we find the central aspects of Social Policy study, the institutions and structures which mediate the more abstract social, political or ideological values, and translate these into action in the form of policies intended to shape individual lives to achieve some kind of collective aim. Although the main policy areas covered in this book are those associated with state welfare provision, policy, and especially social policy, is not restricted to the activities of the state. Social policy also concerns action undertaken by our families, friends and community, collectively, sometimes called the 'informal' sector, as well as voluntary or 'not for profit' organizations, and, increasingly, the private sector through for example the perks of employment (from occupational pensions to gym membership) as well as newer forms of commercial involvement in the provision of services. Thus there are a number of different social policy actors or agencies of welfare, each having contrasting values and aims in terms of their role in provision, depending on the historical circumstances of their involvement and their relationship to the people to whom the provision of welfare is directed. The relationship between a mother and her child for example is clearly different to the relationship between an employer and employee,

or a volunteer support worker and her or his client, or a school teacher and pupil. For most people, the largest share of individual welfare provision is undertaken in the home within households and families and includes basic need fulfilment such as the provision of food but also aspects of health, education, personal care and emotional well-being. We don't, for example, present ourselves at our local accident and emergency department every time we catch a cold. However, there are many ways in which informal welfare provision is insufficient to meet needs since it relies on the existence of both material and non-material resources that are not universally available or adequate. It is for this reason that historically, individuals have sought and continue to seek collective solutions to the meeting of social needs through both voluntary and political action. Those, on the other hand who regard informal provision as insufficient but who do have access to material resources, have sought individual solutions in the market for private provision.

Consideration of Daniel in the context of meso-level analysis would lead us to explore both the range of institutions which might be called upon to intervene in his life, and also the nature of that intervention. A response to Daniel's behaviour could involve both formal state agencies in the areas of education, social work and criminal justice such as his school and his area Youth Offending Team, but at the same time his family and local community might also be called upon if, for example, his parents or guardians were required to attend parenting classes or if he were served with an Anti-Social Behaviour Order (ASBO) which local residents were encouraged to monitor. From these responses to the 'problem' of Daniel we can see that a mixture of rights and obligations is operating in the form of societal expectations regarding the roles and behaviour of Daniel, his family and his local community and the expectations of each of these groups and individuals regarding support that can or should be provided by the state. Our responsibilities towards each other and the treatment we can expect, whether as close family members, acquaintances or as strangers we have never met, are also part of the essence of social policy.

## **Rights and Obligations**

The case of Sarah outlined in Box 1.2 raise some central issues in social policy debate around questions of rights and responsibilities. In the post-war context, lone parents became a (some would argue 'soft') target for criticism during the late 1980s when the Conservative government, influenced specifically by Charles Murray (1990) and other US commentators, took a condemnatory stance towards unmarried mothers in particular. The argument ran that young women were deliberately choosing to raise children without their fathers because generous social security and housing provision encouraged them to do so. These mothers and their children were blamed for many social ills from youth crime to poor educational attainment to the general breakdown of the moral fabric of society. What the government of the time lacked in evidence and policy ideas it made up for in harsh words and the demonization of what is a very diverse and fluid social category. We will return to the substance of family change in Chapter 12 but it is useful here to highlight the key features of this

### Box 1.2 Sarah: What is to be done?

Sarah is a 36 year old divorced lone parent with a son aged 11 and a daughter aged 13. The family live in a privately rented house, the costs of which are met in full via Housing and Council Tax Benefit. The children's father lives close by but pays no maintenance because he suffers from mental health problems, is unable to work and receives Incapacity Benefit. Sarah has a new long-term partner but they live separately because she thinks this is better for the children. Sarah's weekly income therefore consists of the means-tested social assistance benefit Income Support (IS) and the universal but categorical Child Benefit. She is also entitled to some NHS related 'passport' benefits (such as free prescriptions) and free school meals and bus passes for the children.

Sarah left school at 16 with one O level and does not drive, but has since completed a mature access course at her local college which qualifies her for entry to University. For the last 8 years Sarah has worked for 2 hours per week running a local youth club where she earns £20 per week. This money is declared and is allowed under the 'earnings disregard' attached to IS. She is also very active in the local community, working voluntarily for the residents' association and other local groups. Sarah is not ambitious or materialistic and is happy with the roles she plays in relation to her family and community.

debate because it symbolizes significant contests around the understanding of concepts such as 'dependency' and 'participation'. This is particularly important because although the moral critique of lone parents has waned, their economic position is of continued political interest. This interest has finally found substance in the most recent policy changes regarding the employment status of lone parents where Labour, following the release of their 2007 White Paper, *Ready for Work: Full Employment in Our Generation*, are planning to restrict by the child's age, the point at which full-time (lone) parenthood is legitimate insofar as honouring social security claims is concerned. By the end of 2010, lone parents will be expected to become jobseekers when their youngest child reaches the age of 7 years.

One of the fundamental issues at stake here, the obligation to undertake paid work, is bound up with broader question of what 'citizenship' means in twenty-first century UK society. In his influential essay on 'Citizenship and Social Class' written in the immediate post-war context, T. H. Marshall (1963) argued that in addition to the civil and political rights gained in earlier centuries, the twentieth century witnessed the establishment of a set of social rights to health, education and other social services and a 'modicum' of economic welfare, which enabled both social participation and the expression of equality in status of each individual. While Marshall did not explicitly set out a set of obligations concomitant to the rights he identified, it is 'the duties

we owe' that have come to overshadow social policy under Labour, and the duty to be employed is arguably the most significant of these. There are two other issues that arise in examining this question, and Sarah's case captures both of these.

Firstly, there is clearly a gender dimension in the obligation to take paid work, particularly in the case of lone parents, who are predominantly women (male-headed lone parent families have only made up between 1–3 per cent of all families since the early 1990s). If Sarah is expected to take employment then who is to provide the care and support required by her children while she is at work? If she is only expected to work part-time then will the UK's tax credit system guarantee her an acceptable reward for her work? Given that she has limitations on the employment she could seek (she would be unable to access the graduate employment market, she can't drive and she has childcare commitments) what kind of economic independence could she secure? Ultimately, is it fair that because Sarah is living alone with her children that she is denied the choice to be a full-time parent when this choice may be available to women in two-parent households? At the macro level these questions relate to the way that production (economic activity) is valued above social reproduction (raising children and maintaining households over time). Sarah may well be doing an important job in raising her children but in the UK the state is less and less inclined to support this role as a 'status'. While T. H. Marshall's account of citizenship did not recognize the ways in which the role of carer filters access to social rights (see Ruth Lister's (2003) *Citizenship: Feminist Perspectives* for further discussion of this topic), the 'new' Labour version represents an approach to 'adults' that assumes an equality of gender relations which doesn't exist.

Secondly, there is a question related to the valuing of paid and unpaid work in the context of voluntary activity. Sarah's participation in supporting the well-being of her local community through her voluntary and youth work is both an important source of welfare and an expression of the civic virtue often seen as part of the obligations of citizenship. Labour have been very keen to encourage this form of activity and a role for voluntarism was built into the UK welfare state from its inception. Voluntary and charitable activities do, of course, save the government money which would otherwise have to be allocated to the provision of often very specialized welfare services, and so it is debatable whether Sarah's shift from a voluntary worker claiming social security benefits to a part-time employee claiming tax credits would actually serve any economic purpose at all. Certainly a shift such as this would not assist in improving social welfare generally since Sarah's voluntary and youth work may well contribute to the achievement of 'neighbourhood renewal' (which is a government aim) as well as perhaps the prevention of teenagers following Daniel's path. Thus we can see from Sarah's case that our rights and obligations towards the state and collectivities closer to home are both complicated and conflicting. The presence of children in Sarah's case, and her status as a benefit claimant might make a difference to the kinds of rights and obligations which are publicly and politically acceptable, but in Edith's case (see Box 1.3) the responsibilities of individuals and the state have a very different basis.

The UK is considered to be an 'ageing society' in that the proportion of the population that is beyond retirement age is increasing and will continue to do so.

### Box 1.3 Edith: What is to be done?

Edith is 84 and lives alone in a ground floor local authority flat, which she shared with her husband until he died several years ago. Edith has had both hips replaced and the local authority has made some adaptations to her flat in order to facilitate her mobility. A local authority funded carer also visits in the morning and evening to assist Edith with housework and bathing. Edith has three children, a daughter and two sons and several grown-up grandchildren with children of their own but none of this immediate family lives close by. Despite it being a two hour round trip, her daughter, who is retired, visits two or three times a week to do Edith's shopping, to help with other day to day activities and to provide some company, and her sons visit from time to time. Other than this Edith's only visitors are her carer and a niece who lives a short walk away.

Recently Edith has begun to forget things and feels depressed, and she has not been eating properly although she is able to cook for herself. She has been prescribed some anti-depressants by her GP who has also suggested that it might be time to think about an alternative living arrangement.

The official UK statistical service (the Office for National Statistics) reports that while the proportion of people aged 65 and over in 2006 was 16 per cent, by 2031 this will rise to 22 per cent. Thus there will be more and more people in situations similar to that of Edith, for whom decisions about care arrangements and living accommodation will at some point become pressing. Edith's case raises another set of issues relating to our expectations of state assistance and involvement in our lives and thus questions about our rights to care and support particularly in later life, but equally at any time that we require support to enable us to maintain our independence. However, Edith's case also illustrates the ways in which social policy is entwined with provision for emotional, intellectual and very personal needs for both day to day physical activities and the more general need for human dignity and the support of our interpersonal lives. It is relatively simple to meet physical needs through the fitting of handrails and walk-in baths for example, but provision to meet our needs for autonomy, self-worth and the respect of others is not so easy to specify.

Had Edith been a homeowner, perhaps in receipt of a private occupational income or with other sources of income, then the state's obligations to support her care and accommodation needs would be minimal. As a local authority tenant with a funded carer, Edith is much more likely to qualify for state funded care and accommodation in a range of residential settings depending on her needs and their availability in her area. The range of options open reflects the fact that in the UK, as in other developed welfare states, a 'mixed economy' of care exists which means that needs are met via a selection of care providers, both voluntary or charitable and private or commercial

organizations, as well as through directly provided state services. In fact, the latter are becoming less and less important as changes in the nature of state intervention brought about in attempt to reduce costs, mean it has become more of a funder than a provider. However, most decisions on questions of care and accommodation are based on considerations beyond the cost, and bring into play our intimate relationships with family and significant others.

The obligations of kinship are a central part of social anthropological study and in relation to social policy tell us much about the kinds of welfare arrangements we might expect to find in any society. In a post-industrial, increasingly atomized society such as the UK where labour mobility has been encouraged to support economic growth, we find that 'families' are much more geographically dispersed. It is thus not unusual to find that, as with Edith's family, the children of those over retirement age do not live in close proximity to their parents or even their own children. The reasons for this and the more general implications are discussed in more detail in Chapter 12, but here the point is that for Edith (and other people in her situation), there is no guarantee that the obligations of kinship exist, or that even if they do, that a theoretical guarantee can result in practical care and support. Comparative research indicates that the UK is well below the southern European countries in terms of social visiting (an unpublished study at the time of writing, on which one of the authors worked, of the social networks of people over 50 shows that 67 per cent in Britain but 89 per cent in Spain see a close relative (other than spouse) once a week or more) and there are regular reports in the British media of mostly older people dying alone without anyone to notice their passing. While these cases are extreme, they are symptomatic of the challenges and failures faced by society at the macro level in terms of how we construct our social relationships, but also of social policy at the meso level in terms of how our obligations towards each other as humans can be mediated via the collective provision of public services.

In Edith's case, it is the intervention of her GP, a 'gatekeeper' insofar as access to other health and social care services is concerned, that acts as a catalyst to changes in her daily life. The fact that her daughter has taken a caring role may mean that familial obligation falls upon her in relation to the more intensive care that Edith will require from now on. This might reflect what Land and Rose (1985) termed 'compulsory altruism' in respect of the gendered nature of caring within families and women's lack of choice in taking on the caring role. However, bound up with its gendered characteristics, caring is an expression of emotional ties and so a process of moral rationality (Duncan and Edwards, 1997) operates in parallel to the economic rationality that may inform the decisions about Edith's care. The financial costs will not necessarily be foremost in the considerations of Edith's care where her family are concerned even though this may be the most important element of discussion of her case by her local authority representatives. The involvement of a number of different people, representing different agendas and with different perspectives on Edith's welfare again highlights the contested arena within which social policy is practised.

As someone who is already in receipt of public assistance, a 'case conference' to discuss Edith's future arrangements might involve both family and local authority

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representatives such as social workers and housing officers in combination with input from her GP. If Edith were a homeowner with no previous involvement with public services, then decisions regarding her welfare may well be taken by herself and her family alone. Thus we can see that our position in terms of social class and as a welfare service user has implications for the normative definition of our needs and consequently the experience of 'independence' and 'autonomy'. This is not suggesting that families are likely to be any less paternalistic than state agencies but that in the current situation where health and social care services operate within a market, those with greater financial independence will be able to exercise greater power in decisions regarding their care.

The three case studies we have introduced provide food for thought in relation to many of the fundamental concepts, themes and questions which arise in the study and practice of social policy. The next section considers some of the ways in which social policy fits into wider study in the social sciences.

### **Social Policy: Magpie, Jelly-baby or Side-salad?**

In research undertaken amongst academics teaching social policy, the subject was variously referred to in the terms above (Irving and Young, 2004) and it should be clear from the preceding discussion that the theoretical and material concerns of social policy range widely in scope and draw on knowledge and understanding developed across the social sciences from moral philosophy to micro-economics. In this way, social policy, as an academic endeavour, is said to be a magpie, a social science pickpocket taking concepts, methods and theories wherever it sees fit and using them to whatever purpose it sees fit. Some regard this as a disadvantage, with no emblematic key thinkers in the same way that Marx, Weber or Durkheim are for sociology, and allegedly no core area of enquiry which it can call its own. It is not the place here to elaborate on what makes a discipline. Sociology could also be subject to a similar critique regarding its disciplinary provenance. For students, it is less important whether social policy has disciplinary status than whether the right questions are being addressed. In fact, there are many important theorists who have contributed to the study of social policy, too many to list here (many will be found in the references in later chapters), but suffice it to say that what is significant about theorizing in social policy is that it is never concerned with abstraction alone. Social policy is normative, that is, it is concerned with changing the world rather than simply describing it. It is particularly difficult to study social policy from a position of political ambivalence or disinterest and even the pseudo-neutrality implied by the recent governmental reliance on what is termed 'evidence-based policy' is exposed in the thinking around the meta-level questions referred to earlier – the answers to which inform the policy that the 'evidence-base' is established to support. This is not to say that social policy analysis and research is partisan and thus spurious; the academic study of social policy entails working from a constructively critical stance and seeking to both improve understanding and initiate change and influence the direction of that change. As Paul Spicker has aptly noted: 'There would be something

distasteful about rummaging through the chronicles of human misery without trying to produce any positive effect' (Spicker, 1995, p. 7).

For students of social policy, part of its appeal is that it is an academic jelly-baby that can be moulded to fit the disciplinary goals of historians, geographers, economists and so on. At the same time the subject maintains its own empirical concerns and as noted in the previous section, social policy is applied. In view of this it can also be regarded as a side-salad in the sense that along with the aspects of 'deep-theory' found in sociology, the social theory of political science and the modelling of economics, it acts as the real life accompaniment, the set of specific social issues and problems to which more abstract concepts, principles and theories can be applied. Methodologically, social policy study is equally at home in the statistical pictures created through large survey techniques as it is in qualitative and ethnographic research stories, and this has been the case throughout the subject's century-long history. Many social policy researchers contribute to the annual statistical analyses produced by the Office for National Statistics, such as *Social Trends*, while at the other end of the spectrum, journalists produce work which is grounded in the academic study of social policy but which reports the human condition in ways which are popularly identifiable. An example of this would be Polly Toynbee's book *Hard Work* (2003) which provides excellent social policy insight in a narrative form. This kind of reporting actually has a long, and sometimes controversial history: some arguing that Henry Mayhew's work on the London poor for example, pandered to the prurient tendencies of the Victorian middle class, while others believe Mayhew's work, and the popular reporting of other social commentators, were influential in the germination of welfare policies. The academic study of social policy has evolved from its early twentieth century roots in the study of 'social administration' at the Department of Social Science at the London School of Economics. Consequently it is linked very directly to the practice of social work but its purpose was as much to train social researchers in an attempt to inform the work of social welfare professionals as it was to teach frontline professionals themselves. Thus social policy (and administration) has an 'empiricist tradition' concerned with the establishment of social 'facts' which in the early years directed the forms of methodological enquiry towards social surveys and the approach to analysis towards a search for immediate and small-scale 'solutions' rather than calls for social transformation.

No wonder then that the question 'What is social policy?' continues to be the subject of perennial disagreement, and that its status as a discipline or field of study comes under regular scrutiny by those involved in its analysis. What we can be sure of is that we are engaged in the study of human welfare, that we need to know what has been done to improve welfare, who has influenced the directions and forms of development, whose interests policies serve, what the impact of policy has been and how policy changes shape in the light of social, political and economic change. Three decades ago, Mishra defined social policy as 'those social arrangements, patterns and mechanisms that are typically concerned with the distribution of resources in accordance with some criterion of need' (Mishra, 1977, p. xi). This statement neatly captures the scope of study but within this distributional arena, debate and conflict is found in the construction of needs (cf. Edith's case in Box 1.3), whether they are

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expressed or imposed and the kinds of responses proposed to meet them: should they be interventionist or 'light-touch', should there be more regulation of behaviour or less, should there be greater investment (and higher taxation to pay for it) or more efficient use of existing funds?

The answers to these kinds of questions are now much more theoretically informed since the arrival of 'critical' social policy in the late 1970s and 1980s. Although the early Fabian influence was based in social criticism, the development of analyses of welfare states and state welfare from Marxist, feminist and anti-racist (Gough, 1979; Pascall, 1986; Williams, 1989) perspectives and more recently from constructivist perspectives which emphasize diversity, identity and culture (see for example chapters in Lewis et al.'s *Rethinking Social Policy*, 2000) have contributed much to the broadening of social policy horizons. Fiona Williams (1989) for example, demonstrated that although historically the aims and outcomes of policy have been linked to economic structures, or the needs of capitalist production (for an educated, healthy workforce and enough social security to prevent social unrest), that social divisions of gender and 'race' and ethnicity, are also built in to the architecture of the welfare state. Examples of social policy research in the 1980s into areas such as the impact of residency rules on social security entitlements, differences in social housing allocations between different ethnic groups, issues of differential educational achievement and differences of treatment within health services all pointed to the operation of racially discriminatory practices and the existence of institutional racism long before the Macpherson Report into the racist murder of Stephen Lawrence (Macpherson, 1999) established this term in mainstream policy discourse. A final point to consider then before moving on to outline the more specific contents of this book, is that social policy is not always a benign force and that social progress is not always its goal or outcome. Social policy has always been somewhat of a double-edged sword, a 'handmaiden of industry' and social control on the one side, and a product of the struggles for social amelioration on the other.

### **The Content of this Book**

In this book, analyses are mainly focused on this meso level, and also on the key areas of state welfare provision: social security, health, social care, education, and housing. The decision to concentrate on these more traditional areas of social policy is to some extent arbitrary, but at the same time reflects the view that these areas can be subject to a critical and theoretically informed examination which recognizes that social policy is much more than state social policy, and that 'social' policy is much more than that directly concerned with the provision of welfare services. The final chapter will return to some discussion of the nature of social policy in the modern world and thus the scope and concerns of study will re-emerge. In the meantime, we can give some indication of what can be found in this book and what will have to be found elsewhere. Given that we have begun with an example which highlights the problem of crime and what is now termed anti-social behaviour, it might be considered odd that there is no chapter on criminal justice in the book. The omission is deliberate

for two main reasons. Firstly, that the field of criminology has expanded rapidly over the last decade and this expansion has necessarily given rise to the publication of a wealth of introductory literature addressing both sociological enquiry into crime and the analysis of crime policy. Secondly, and related to this sudden interest in crime and its perpetrators, under the Labour governments from 1997, the boundary between social and crime policy has become extremely fuzzy to the extent that crime policy often takes primacy in the design of policies which are only indirectly concerned with the prevention and treatment of crime. This is particularly the case in relation to housing, regeneration and social exclusion policies, but can also be identified in policies from asylum to maternity services. It is important that the study of social policy continues to question such trends rather than reinforcing state directed shifts in the politics of welfare. Therefore, while we recognize that all criminal justice policy has social significance, we are interested in it here only as it intersects with other areas of welfare provision such as housing and social work services.

The policy areas covered in this book do, ostensibly, fit the traditional and sometimes criticized 'classic welfare state' model of social policy, but in attempting to build understanding of a subject it is important to focus on depth rather than breadth, to develop a sense of principles and themes across a limited range of topics, rather than gather a vast range of knowledge. Given that beyond the traditional areas covered here, social policy analysis can arguably be undertaken in relation to any action that has an impact on quality of life and the distribution of welfare, it would be impossible and unwise to attempt to address every aspect in a single text. For a student new to the subject, it would also be overwhelming to find that the field of study appeared to cover 'everything' and so we begin with tradition and hope that having got to grips with the basics, that students can then use their understanding to take social policy study in the direction of their choice.

The policy areas explored in this book are those developed in the aftermath of the Second World War in response to the existence of 'five giants' identified by the main architect of the British welfare state, William Beveridge, as the great social evils which had to be eliminated for successful post-war reconstruction: want, ignorance, idleness, disease and squalor. The 1942 Beveridge Report is regarded as having provided the blueprint for British welfare arrangements although his plans were never brought to full fruition, and were subject to many amendments, omissions and oversights between the publication of the report, the enactment of legislation such as the 1944 Education Act, and the actual implementation of policy. In addition to the areas of social security, education and children's policy, employment, health and housing, this book also contains a chapter on social care of adults. These kinds of localized caring services, emerging from family and community support systems, have formed the basis of social intervention throughout the period of industrialization and thus are at the heart of social policy study.

It would be impossible to come to a reasonable understanding of current and recent policy without some exploration of the both the historical and political context in which it has evolved. So much of what we experience of twenty-first century social policy is steeped in the welfare struggles of the past, and despite over a century of political change and concomitant welfare reform, many of the principles which

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underpin welfare arrangements in the UK, are those established in England's pre-modern existence. However, although a historical perspective assists in explaining the shape of the present (the subject of the next chapter), history does not determine current or future developments. The role of politics in explaining the means by which policy is made and the ways in which it is interpreted and delivered is essential (see Chapters 3 and 4). Through engagement with these two approaches to analysis we can uncover the power relationships between interested actors, the structures and institutions via which power is exercised and the difference between what is intended through policy and what is actually achieved. It is important to note here that because of political change, and the historical relationships of the four constituent countries of the UK, the terminology used in the rest of the book will vary depending on topic and context and thus readers will find references to the UK and (where services diverge across the countries) concentration on much the largest of the countries (England) but references to special features of the others.

This book also contains a chapter dealing with the comparative dimension of social policy study. Although the preceding chapters are focused on social policy in the UK, it is clear that national welfare concerns are subject to increasing levels of external influence. This is not to say that learning from abroad is new or that nation states are politically immobilized. Economically advanced countries have always looked to one another for social policy ideas; the pension system introduced in early twentieth-century Britain had been informed by the late nineteenth-century systems of social provision introduced in Bismarck's Germany for example, and it is important that the political effects of the current phase of global economic development are not overstated. What is significant for social policy is the greater intensity of cross-national exchange and the establishment of new forms of international and trans-national relationships which give rise to new forms of inequality and new ways to respond to them. In the light of these changes, it is imperative that students of social policy are aware of the comparative context from the outset, and that UK based students can place the content of their own country's welfare arrangements in the context of the wider world. Despite the similarity of social problems across national borders (poverty, powerlessness, ill-health and so on) the social policy response is neither uniform nor universal.

The final chapter considers some of the themes which are apparent throughout the discussions of policy context and policy areas and links these to the topic of social change which also represents a significant element of any understanding of social policy. Many social policies are implemented in order to bring about social change, as discussed in relation to rights and responsibilities above. But policy operates within frameworks of power relations both passively, reflecting patterns of domination and subordination and also actively in reinforcing unequal relationships and sometimes establishing new forms of inequality, for example between people who are eligible for support and those in similar situations who are not. Thus social change is not always equivalent to social progress. The aspects of change explored in the concluding chapter are directly linked to much longer established analyses of social division. Inequality, despite its contested nature, is a fundamental concern of social policy and the transformation of families, work and the age and ethnic

composition of populations has fundamental implications for the nature and form of inequalities. For social policy there is a double challenge, firstly to understand the nature of change, its good and bad points, and secondly to actively respond to it using measures which are designed to be either supportive or to arrest what are regarded as negative developments.

### Suggestions for Further Reading

A good introduction to the key issues about social policy is to investigate the various ideological perspectives on its role in society. George and Wilding's *Welfare and Ideology* (1994) offers an excellent overview of this subject. Fiona Williams's *Social Policy* (1989) also offers an introduction to the ideological debate but with an emphasis on the need to take account of gender, class and race in both historical and contemporary social policy analysis. Issues about the relationship between social problems and social policy are explored in May, Page and Brunsdon (eds.) *Understanding Social Problems* (2001). An overview of the whole field of social policy is offered in an edited volume by Alcock, Erskine and May (eds.) *The Student's Companion to Social Policy* (2003). At the time of writing a new edition of this by Alcock, May and Rowlingson (2008) is due. Alcock, Erskine and May have also produced a valuable reference book *The Blackwell Dictionary of Social Policy* (2002). Hartley Dean's (2006) *Social Policy*, is published as part of a series of short introductions, and provides an account of social policy which is both educative and entertaining.

The Social Policy Association has a good web site with many links to other useful sites at [www.socialpolicy.net](http://www.socialpolicy.net). There is also a government website that provides a gateway to sites for individual departments, agencies, local authorities and some international organizations at [www.direct.gov.uk](http://www.direct.gov.uk).