

# What *is* Social Policy?

When I tell people I teach Social Policy, a fairly common response is ‘Oh! . . . [pause]. What’s that exactly?’ Social Policy textbooks sometimes try and suggest that Social Policy is hard to define. Or else they contend there is something ‘confusing’ about the distinction to be drawn between Social Policy as an academic subject on the one hand and the specific outcomes of the social policy-making process on the other; or about whether Social Policy is ‘merely’ an interdisciplinary field of study, as opposed to a social science discipline in its own right (Alcock 2003). For my part, however, I don’t find the question difficult at all. Social Policy is the study of human wellbeing, to which there can be two kinds of response:

- So it’s all about *doing good* for people?
- So it must be about pretty much *everything* really?

The answer to both comments is ‘Well, yes and no’. More specifically, Social Policy entails the study of the social relations necessary for human wellbeing and the systems by which wellbeing may be promoted. It’s about the many and various things that affect the kinds of life that you and I and everyone can live. My preference, incidentally, is for the term ‘wellbeing’, rather than ‘welfare’, because wellbeing is about how well people *are*, not how well they *do* (which, strictly speaking, is what welfare means). Think for a moment about the things you need to make life worth living: essential services, such as healthcare and education; a means of livelihood, such as a job and money; vital but intangible things,

such as love and security. Now think about the ways in which these can be organized: by government and official bodies; through businesses, social groups, charities, local associations and churches; through neighbours, families and loved ones. Understanding these things is the stuff of Social Policy.

In this chapter I aim to illustrate, first, the immense scale of the phenomena with which Social Policy is concerned, but also its quite specific nature; second, the fabulous diversity of the social scientific traditions on which Social Policy can draw, but also the strict rigour of its focus; third, the relevance of Social Policy to everybody's individual, everyday lives; but fourth, the importance of Social Policy to human society in general.

Before I begin, however, let me return just for one moment to the 'confusion' alluded to above between Social Policy, the subject, and the social policy or policies that are the object of our study. As I have already signalled in my Preface, I propose throughout this book to adopt a rather simple convention that is not in general use, but which may, I hope, allay confusion. When I refer to Social Policy with a capital 'S' and a capital 'P', I am writing about the academic study of social policy. When I refer to social policy with a lower-case 's' and a lower-case 'p', I shall be talking about the general or the particular policy or policies that have been determined in the fields of social security, health, education, social care and protection or – as you will see – in any number of spheres that may bear upon human wellbeing.

## Hey, Big Spender!

Social Policy is concerned with much, much more than the things that governments spend our money on. Nevertheless, though it refers only to the visible tip of the Social Policy iceberg, the most conspicuous evidence of the importance of social policies is 'social spending'. If we take a country such as the UK, the government planned in the 2004–5 tax year to spend roughly £320 billion on what may conventionally be defined as 'social' or social policy spending (HM Treasury 2004a); that is to say, on things like pensions, hospitals and schools. That amounts to about two thirds of total public spending and around one quarter of this particular nation's annual income (or what is usually called Gross Domestic Product or 'GDP'). It is a huge sum of money: more than most people can really comprehend or even imagine. If one were searching for a comparison, £320 billion is over seven and a half thousand times more than the first ever double rollover jackpot on the UK National Lottery, which was 'only' £42 million, but is still perhaps more than any ordinary

person could really envisage owning, let alone spending. What the UK spends on social policy is hardly small change!

And yet, the UK is by no means exceptional. In fact, as a proportion of GDP the UK's social policy spending is rather less than in a lot of other developed countries. In countries like France and Germany, for example, social policy spending is equivalent to rather more than one quarter of GDP, while in Sweden it is as much as one third (see, for example, Taylor-Gooby 2002: table 1). There are, on the other hand, other major countries where social spending is proportionately much lower than in the UK. In the USA, for example, it is equivalent to barely one sixth of GDP. And, of course, many developing countries can afford to spend very little on social policy at all. In chapter 3 we shall try to understand a bit more about the differences between different countries' approaches to social policy.

Also, the amount governments spend on social policy can go up or down, depending on changing priorities. In democratic countries such priorities will to some extent reflect the wishes of the electorate and the taxpayers who must finance such spending. But it depends just as much on the fluctuating needs of the population and on the state of the country's economy. To take the UK as an example once again, the extent of its social spending had grown from around 2 per cent of GDP at the very beginning of the twentieth century to somewhere around its present level by the 1970s. Since then spending has fluctuated as Conservative governments during the 1980s and '90s attempted, in spite of a variety of pressures, to 'keep the lid on' (Glennister 1998). Following this, Labour governments, after an initial period of restraint, have allowed social spending to increase slightly, particularly in the areas of health and education (HM Treasury 2004b). We shall try to understand a bit more about ideological, demographic and economic causes of such variations in the chapters that follow.

For the moment, however, let us focus on the scale and nature of social policy spending. Table 1.1 provides a simplified explanation of the UK government's budget plans for the year in which this book was written. The expenditure headings are very broadly defined, so the picture that is presented is rather rough and ready. None the less, this tells us that the UK government was planning to spend roughly twelve times as much on social policy as it was on defence, or on law and order. By this criterion we might say that social policy in fact receives a much higher priority than war making or crime busting.

However, table 1.1 also shows us that, for example, the government expected to spend more than eight times as much on pensions and social security benefits as on housing and the environment. In a country such as the UK, that is perhaps hardly surprising these days. The UK is quite

Table 1.1 UK government spending 2004–5 (projected)

	£ billion	% total spending	% GDP
<b>Social spending</b>			
Social security	138	28	12
Health	81	17	7
Education	63	13	5
Housing and environment	17	3	1
Personal social services	22	5	2
<b>Other spending</b>			
Defence	27	6	2
Law and order	29	6	2
Industry, agriculture and employment	20	4	2
Transport	16	3	1
Other (e.g. sport and culture international development, etc.)	49	10	4
Debt interest	25	5	2
<b>Total public spending</b>	<b>488</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>41</b>

The budget headings and classification of spending differ slightly from previous conventions, having been adjusted to accord with international standards. Figures may not sum to total due to rounding.

Source: [http://budget2004.treasury.gov.uk/page\\_09.html](http://budget2004.treasury.gov.uk/page_09.html) (Crown Copyright) and see HM Treasury 2004a.

unusual compared to other countries because such a high proportion of householders (more than two thirds) own their own homes and so most spending on housing tends to be ‘private’, rather than ‘public’. In other words, it’s not that we don’t as a nation spend money on housing, it’s simply a question of how we organize this. In chapter 4 we shall see that although the government’s social policies in respect of housing may not entail massive amounts of public *spending*, they do, for example, entail the *regulation* of housing provision.

We shall also see that although governments may spend a great deal of public money on pensions for older people, this may be more than matched by private spending on occupational and personal pension schemes, all of which, like private housing, may be closely regulated by social policy. On top of this, as we shall see in chapters 8 and 9, the definition of what does and doesn’t count as a social policy or as social spending is increasingly being challenged. Social Policy is about more

than the services governments provide. Even when we take account of the staggering sums of public money that are recorded as being spent on social policy, particularly in the countries of the developed world, this is still not a true indicator of the extent to which social policy may touch our lives as we grow up and grow old, as workers and as citizens, in our private lives and through the public institutions with which we engage.

None the less, in a world where money matters, Social Policy is a very substantial subject.

## Butterflies versus Magpies

In the last section we adopted a very simple approach to the economics of public spending. Social Policy as an academic subject is in the habit of adopting all kinds of different approaches. That is one of its greatest attractions. It brings in ideas and analytical methods from sociology, from political science and from economics; it employs insights from social anthropology, demography, socio-legal studies, social psychology, social history, human geography and development studies; it will frequently draw upon philosophy; in fact it will go pretty much wherever it needs to find the best way to study issues relevant to the achievement of human wellbeing. What is more, Social Policy is not just multi-disciplinary, it is also inter-disciplinary. In other words it combines approaches from the different social sciences.

This may sound as if Social Policy is just a sort of ‘pick-and-mix’ subject; a subject that’s good for people who can’t make up their minds. This is not the case. Certainly, Social Policy is a wonderful subject for people who don’t want to tie themselves down to just one discipline, but that doesn’t mean it is suitable for ditherers, or for the kind of intellectual butterflies that flutter aimlessly from idea to idea. Students of Social Policy are more like magpies than butterflies. They are pragmatic, even ruthless, in the way they pick whatever they need from across the social sciences in order to fashion answers to real life issues. There is an element of sheer promiscuity about Social Policy in its willingness to seize upon attractive and workable ideas from across the social scientific spectrum. But it remains a highly rigorous subject because it retains a highly specific commitment to the cause of human wellbeing.

Understanding what is required to achieve human wellbeing means studying social, political and economic processes. It can entail attention to the complex details of policy design or to abstract theories and generalized overviews. It may require the ability to analyse statistical information; to evaluate the successes and failures of particular policies; to interpret popular aspirations; to investigate the perceptions of marginalized

or vulnerable people; to understand the past; and to anticipate the future.

We refer to Social Policy as a social science, and the term ‘science’ might suggest that it is cold and clinical, hard and objective. Originally, however, the term ‘science’ was applied to all branches of human knowledge, including creative and philosophical forms of thinking. Social Policy is self-evidently concerned with the policy-making process, which has always entailed an element of intuition and creativity. Aneurin Bevan, the firebrand Labour politician who was responsible in the 1940s for hammering out the political compromises that established the UK’s National Health Service, once said:

By the study of anthropology, sociology, psychology and such elements of social and political economy as are relevant, we try to work out our correct principles to guide us in our approach to the social problems of the time. Nevertheless, the application of those principles to a given situation is an art. (1952: 35–6)

To my mind, this is a pretty good explanation of what Social Policy is about. Social Policy is concerned with hard evidence, technical theories and logical analysis, but it must also be creative. It often calls for imagination and insight. Social Policy is as much about feelings as about facts. To study Social Policy properly one needs commitment; one needs to be able to empathize with others; one needs to interpret the world around.

## Who Cares?

This leads us to the question of why we should be concerned about the attainment of human wellbeing. Human societies are complex associations of interdependent beings. In other words, human beings are social creatures who depend upon each other. Early sociologists, such as Emile Durkheim (1893), endeavoured to understand the complexity of modern societies in terms of the increasingly sophisticated ways in which people collaborate to produce life’s necessities. The social policies to which societies give birth may be understood as the way in which any particular society recognizes and gives expression to the interdependency of its members. Writing in the same era as Aneurin Bevan, an academic and founding father of Social Policy, Richard Titmuss, argued that what we have come to know as the ‘welfare state’ was then emerging because

... more ‘states of dependency’ have been defined and recognised as collective responsibilities, and more differential provision has been

made in respect of them. These 'states of dependency' arise for the vast majority of the population whenever they are not in a position to 'earn life' for themselves and their families; they are then dependent people. In industrialised societies, there are many causes of dependency; they may be 'natural' dependencies as in childhood, extreme old age and child-bearing. They may be caused by physical and psychological ill health and incapacity; in part, these are culturally determined dependencies. Or they may be wholly or predominantly determined by social and cultural factors. These, it may be said, are the 'man-made' dependencies. (1955: 64)

Since Titmuss wrote these words the world has moved on. In the age of information technologies, most industrialized societies are better described as 'post-industrialized'. The so-called 'golden age' of the welfare state – which was dawning as Titmuss wrote – may now already have passed (see Esping-Andersen 1996: ch. 1). None the less, though they may be reluctant to admit it (see Dean 2004a: ch. 4) people are still as interdependent as ever they were. The ways in which we meet our welfare needs may have been changing, but the welfare state – as we have seen above – is still very much in evidence in most developed nations of the world. And Titmuss was right. Many of the dependencies we experience are fashioned by social and cultural factors: for example, by changes in the nature of labour markets and by changing patterns of household formation. The way we can or can't depend on jobs and our families is forever changing and this in turn affects how we might depend on the wider community or on the state.

Titmuss has relevance for another reason. In a later work (Titmuss 1970), he drew on social anthropological evidence to suggest that pre-industrial societies were based on gift giving. The interdependency of the members of supposedly 'primitive' societies could be sustained through an array of unilateral transactions or gift-relationships. The function of social policies in advanced capitalist societies, according to Titmuss, is to perpetuate such gift-relationships. In an age when societies are more complex, more differentiated and most transactions take the form of bilateral market exchanges, a system of taxes, benefits and public services enables us to give to one another: not just to our immediate neighbours, but also, importantly, to distant and anonymous strangers. Not only is it still possible to sustain the interdependent nature of our human existence, but – in theory at least – it is possible through the development of social policies to compensate for some of the 'person-made' or manufactured dependencies that contemporary society generates.

This might make it sound as if social policies are simply a vehicle for human altruism. If this were so, Social Policy, by implication, would be a rather warm-hearted, 'cuddly' sort of academic subject. There is,

however, more to it than that: first, because our dependencies are inevitably bound up within unequal relations of power; second, because the ethical basis of social policy provision, or 'giving', are inevitably contested.

Compensating individuals for their dependency may entail making material provision for them at various stages in their lives, but it can also entail protecting them against the exploitation that may be associated with particular kinds of dependency. Most people would agree that society should protect children and older people from child or elder abuse and policies to this end are by and large uncontroversial. We are all against sin! However, the idea that we should protect workers from exploitation by their employers raises issues to do with class and class conflict. Social policies may to a greater or lesser extent enable workers to avoid dependency on an employer other than upon socially acceptable terms (e.g. Esping-Andersen 1990): this is more controversial. There are other forms of dependency which social policies in developed welfare states have not only ignored or failed to address, but may have perpetuated. Of particular concern is women's dependency within families and issues of gender inequality. Social policies can be framed in ways that either reinforce or refashion social assumptions about who should care for whom and in what ways. These are issues to which we shall return in chapter 7, but the point for now is that Social Policy is concerned with the different ways in which – with or without a welfare state – we as human beings care for and about each other.

The distinction between 'caring for' and 'caring about' (see Parker 1981) is an important one. 'Caring for' is a practical business and most of it, even in developed welfare states, is undertaken within families and by women. Responsibility for caring for children, for sick, disabled or frail elderly people tends to fall, in the first instance at least, upon mothers and female family members. 'Caring about', on the other hand, is something that can be addressed through, or consigned to, the public sphere of social policy making. The public policy-making sphere is generally male dominated and its ethos is informed, not by the nature of human relationships, but by abstract principles concerning the importance of Work, Family and Nation (Williams 1989). Such principles have tended in many welfare states to accord rights selectively to white male working breadwinners, at the expense, it has been argued, of women, disabled people, minority ethnic groups and foreigners. Certain feminists have argued that social policies should be founded on a different ethos (e.g. Sevenhuijssen 2000), an approach that would start from the idea that we are all – men and women alike – equally interdependent and equally capable of caring for one another. This opens up new ways of thinking about the relevance of policy to our everyday lives – for example,

about the relative importance of care work, as opposed to paid work. But as societies become ever more differentiated and the world as a whole becomes ever more dynamically interconnected, we also need to rethink some of those abstract principles by which we define and care about the rights of strangers, of excluded minorities and of distant peoples (see Dean 2004a: ch. 10).

The role of Social Policy, as a critical academic subject, is to engage with such debates and to reflect on the scope and the attainable limits of the pursuit of human wellbeing.

## A Good Life

This brings us finally in this introductory chapter to say something about what ‘wellbeing’ might entail. The term ‘refers to the totality of an individual’s social relations’ (Hoggett 2000: 145). Over 2,000 years ago, long before the arguably charming but wholly facile BBC television comedy series bearing a similar title, Aristotle sought to define what is required to live ‘a good life’. His answer, according to Alberto – the mysterious philosophy teacher in Jostein Gaarder’s novel, *Sophie’s World* – was that:

Man can only achieve happiness by using all his abilities and capabilities. Aristotle held that there are three forms of happiness. The first . . . is a life of pleasure and enjoyment. The second . . . is a life as a free and responsible citizen. The third . . . is a life as a thinker and philosopher. Aristotle then emphasized that all three criteria must be present for man to find happiness and fulfilment. (Gaarder 1996: 97)

Shockingly, by current standards, Aristotle considered that neither women nor slaves were capable of achieving the virtues required for a good life. Such virtues, it would appear, were available only to mature male citizens of the Athenian city-state. Despite this, there is a holistic neo-Aristotelian notion of wellbeing that remains influential today. In particular, one of the foremost philosophers of our present era, Amartya Sen, has developed the concept of capabilities. It may be inferred from the quotation above that there is a distinction to be drawn between ‘abilities’ and ‘capabilities’. Sen uses the term ‘capabilities’ to refer not simply to what people are able to do, but to their freedom to choose and to lead the kind of lives they value – and have reason to value (see, for example, Sen 1985; 1999). Sen has employed this concept in a way that is important for Social Policy because it cuts through the debate about whether our human needs are absolute or culturally relative; whether,

that is, all humans have certain irreducible needs, or whether we tend merely to want the things that others have in the society in which we happen to live. Sen's argument is that our need for commodities is relative: it depends entirely on the social and economic context in which we find ourselves, but our need for capabilities – for the freedom properly to function as members of human society – is absolute. Poverty, for Sen, should be defined in terms of 'capability deprivation'.

Sen's approach has influenced the development of a particular theory of human need, espoused by Len Doyal and Ian Gough (1991). In opposition to those who argue that it is impossible to define basic human needs, they insist there are universal preconditions for participation in a good life that are applicable to all human beings. These are defined as physical health and personal autonomy. Not only do we need to be healthy enough physically to survive, but as human beings we also need to be able to make informed choices about our lives. Although these basic needs can be met in a multitude of different ways, it is possible nevertheless to define certain 'universal satisfier characteristics' or intermediate needs, namely adequate nutritional food and water, adequate protective housing, non-hazardous work and physical environments, appropriate healthcare, security in childhood, significant primary relationships, physical and economic security, safe birth control and childbearing, and appropriate basic and cross-cultural education.

The 'needs satisfiers' that Doyal and Gough identify would guarantee a dignified, if potentially a rather frugal, existence. It should be emphasized, however, that this is a theory with a 'normative' purpose. Not only does it say this is how we can scientifically define what human beings need, it is also saying that this is how we define the societal preconditions for *optimizing* the satisfaction of human needs. A similar kind of neo-Aristotelian argument is developed by Martha Nussbaum (2000) who has written about what she calls 'combined capabilities': the idea that individual capabilities may be facilitated by institutional conditions; or, in other words, by social policies.

We must always be mindful that social policies, when they are implemented, do not necessarily promote human capabilities or well-being. They can also undermine them. As we shall see in chapter 8, the study of Social Policy must contend with the reality that social policies often have a 'dark side' (e.g. Squires 1990). On the one hand, ensuring that some of us have a good life may necessarily mean that we must protect ourselves from the predations of 'others', whose criminal or antisocial behaviour we may seek to curtail. In this context, criminal justice policies – and their consequences both for the victims and the perpetrators of crime – are a necessary concern of Social Policy. But

beyond the realms of criminal justice policy there are many social policies that impose rules or conditions upon the day-to-day behaviour of all kinds of people: rules and conditions that may, for example, enforce particular interpretations of work and family responsibility. In the process, social policies, intentionally or unintentionally, may stigmatize, exclude or control certain individuals or groups and so deny them the personal autonomy that is necessary to human wellbeing. As a critical social science subject, Social Policy is concerned with the extent to which social policies succeed or fail to promote human wellbeing and with their potentially counterproductive effects.

It remains the case, therefore, that Social Policy is about how people may achieve a good life. This does not entail making everyone happy, which isn't feasible given that life and death entail pain as well as pleasure. Nor does it mean turning us all into philosophers, which seems hardly desirable given that human beings are diverse in their interests and propensities. What it does entail is the systematic study of how societies of different kinds can ensure, so far as possible, that their members enjoy good health, that they can freely participate in society and that they are able to think for themselves.

During the student protests in Paris in 1968, street posters appeared bearing the slogan 'Be realistic: demand the impossible'. Defining Social Policy in the terms I have suggested is aspirational and, in one sense, revolutionary: it is demanding the impossible. In another sense, however, it is perfectly sensible and strictly pragmatic: it is, indeed, wholly realistic. There is no mystery to the paradox. It is simply that Social Policy is a subject that allows its students to address some of the biggest questions to do with the nature of our social existence, but in practically relevant ways.

## Summary

This chapter has explained that the subject, Social Policy, involves the study of human wellbeing, the social relations necessary for wellbeing and the systems by which wellbeing may be promoted:

- It is concerned, in part, with the social policies that governments have in relation to such things as social security, health, education, housing and the personal social services. In the developed countries of the world, the scale of spending on social policies is absolutely massive and generally accounts for a major slice of national income.
- It is both multi- and inter-disciplinary. It is not, however, a subject for butterflies – who flit aimlessly from idea to idea – but for magpies,

who purposefully, but imaginatively, pick what they need from across the social sciences in a way that is both pragmatic and creative.

- It focuses on the nature of human interdependency; on the way in which people care for and about each other; on the part the ‘welfare state’ plays in shaping the nature of caring – and, for example, the gender implications; on ethical questions about principles of care and justice.
- Its goal is to maximize people’s chances of a good life. Its substance, therefore, lies in the theoretical debate and practical definition of what constitutes the good life and the fundamental nature of human need.