Any attempt to ‘define’ comparative social policy in just a few words is bound to run into trouble. This is not only because of the difficulty in characterizing a composite term, but also due to the contested nature of both of its elements, that is, the substantive focus of social policy and the comparative approach. Is social policy an academic discipline or a field of study? Which particular programmes should be regarded as social policy and which should not? What is comparative analysis and is it different from other qualitative or quantitative research strategies in social science? Is there any scientific research that is not, explicitly or implicitly, comparative in nature?

The first part of this chapter addresses some of these definitional problems. It does not make any claims to be exhaustive but aims to highlight instead the limitations of delving into an extensive definitional mapping exercise of what are ultimately ambiguous and amorphous substantive and methodological boundaries. A more helpful approach to appreciating what comparative social policy is about is simply to review some of the major contributions to the field. As will be seen below, comparative social policy has not only grown enormously over the past three decades or so, but has also progressed to a considerable degree.

BOUNDARIES

Unlike economic policy or environmental policy, social policy can be regarded as a ‘diffuse, residual category’ (Wilensky et al., 1987, p. 381). In academic discourse, the term tends to be confined to the publicly provided, or regulated, core programmes such as income maintenance (or social security), housing, health and social services. Yet beyond these generally accepted central areas, there is a range of other public policies that might legitimately be included in the definition given that they are aimed at securing or enhancing the well-being and the life chances of individuals. Tax allowances, tax credits or exemptions, for example, are in many ways simply alternatives to providing social security transfers in the sense that they raise the disposable income of certain social groups. Education, active labour market policies, occupational health and health and safety
issues impinge on an individual’s state of welfare by providing opportunities for, or by directly improving the level of social and material protection. Yet these areas have tended to be excluded from standard textbooks on social policy, while non-public forms of welfare production on the part of voluntary organizations, families or individuals are still given scant attention.

There is no consensus as to the academic nature of social policy analysis either. Is it a discipline in its own right, or rather a field of research that attracts scientists from different disciplines, such as sociology, political science, economics, history and legal studies, and is thus approached from within a number of theoretical perspectives, guided by different research questions, and subjected to a variety of methodological tools? The answer depends on the definition of ‘academic discipline’. With reference to the situation in the UK, Alcock (1996) regards social policy as an academic discipline because of its institutional recognition, indicated by the existence of university departments and undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in social policy, academic journals devoted to publishing studies of social policy and the existence of a professional association. By contrast, Spicker (1995) points to scientific criteria and argues that social policy ‘is not claiming to be a discipline’ because it has no ‘distinctive view of the world, or special methods or approaches. It is defined by what it studies, not by how it goes about it’ (p. 8). Similarly, Erskine (1998, p. 15) considers it to be a ‘multidisciplinary field of study rather than a discipline’ because it lacks a ‘unique set of methods, concepts, theories or insights’.

Clearly, social policy is not a sub-discipline of another more recognized discipline within social sciences, such as sociology or economics. Instead, the study of social policy shares certain interests and core concepts with these and other established disciplines. Indeed, in most countries in which the analysis of social policy has achieved a certain level of recognition and academic output, there are no separate university departments that offer undergraduate degrees in social policy. More typical are academics who have been trained in one of a range of disciplines, are employed in departments of sociology, political science or economics, and have developed an interest and become specialists in the analysis of social policy. They might offer specialist university units or modules on different aspects of social policy, be engaged in a research framework that might revolve around a particular question of social policy, or work in social policy research centres. Their number seems to have grown in the past decades, and so has (for a variety of reasons, see Clasen, 1999) the number of them who have become involved in analysing problems of social policy not only in their own countries but in a comparative cross-national perspective.

Given its complexity, the multi-disciplinary analysis of social policy
can pose methodological problems. Yet different perspectives of the same issue, say sociological and economic assessments of welfare-to-work policies, can be mutually challenging and, potentially at least, cross-fertilizing. The same applies to comparative social policy research. For example, between the 1960s and 1980s, the debate on determinants of welfare state change was dominated by scholars working within a macro-sociological frame of reference. Explanatory variables such as modernization, class and class alliances, risk groups and demographic change figured prominently. By contrast, influenced by Pierson (1994) the debate on change and stability in mature welfare states since the 1990s has concentrated on options and limitations for policy-makers to engage in processes of welfare retrenchment and welfare restructuring. This shift in focus might be attributable to the direction of welfare state change that occurred in the 1970s and 1980s, that is, from expansion to consolidation. In any case, it has drawn more political scientists into the debate and introduced other core independent (and partly also dependent) variables, such as institutions, veto points and party constellations (Green-Pedersen and Haverland, 2002). The dispute between adherents of the ‘new’ and ‘old’ politics of the welfare state (Pierson, 2001) is partly also a debate between political science and sociology, which, potentially, benefits the analytical reflexivity and thus quality of contemporary scholarship of welfare state restructuring.

Central to social policy is the specific focus upon the trajectory and implementation of policies that influence the social circumstances, or well-being, of individuals. It is this focus on the process and substance of policy that makes social policy distinct from sociology and, in approach, similar to public policy. Indeed, comparative social policy might be regarded as akin to comparative public policy, which developed in the 1970s as a field of study within political science and comparative politics (Leichter, 1977; Landman, 2000). While many studies within comparative public policy cover policy fields that are only loosely connected to social policy, such as urban planning or environmental policy, several major texts and reviews in the area (Dierkes et al., 1987; Heidenheimer et al., 1990; Castles, 1998) include core social policy programmes such as social security, housing, health or education or cover ‘the welfare state’ as a whole. Depending on the particular aims and interests, that is, discussing what and how policies are delivered in different countries, why policies have developed similarly or seem to diverge, or what outcomes they produce, analyses will draw on different disciplines. These include comparative politics and public administration, which can inform studies interested in modes of policy delivery. Researchers investigating the causes for policy emergence and for variation in policy development tend to draw
on macro-sociology, political economy and history as frameworks that provide theoretical propositions or hypotheses. Others who are primarily interested in assessing the effects of social policies across countries might turn to evaluation and implementation studies, to economics and also to social philosophy. After all, social policy is based on redistribution and thus a contested terrain in which preferences, debates and strategies are, at least partly, informed by normative perceptions and values about ‘the type of society in which we like to live in’ (Heidenheimer et al., 1990).

COMPARATIVE SOCIAL POLICY AS A METHODOLOGY

As Higgins (1986, p. 24) pointed out, ‘comparative analysis is a methodology, rather than a substantive area of study, and should be employed where it can illuminate specific questions and hypotheses’. In other words, rather than attempting to come to grips with the essence of comparative social policy via defining its ultimately ambiguous, contested and amorphous subject matter, its actual distinctive feature can be found in the adopted research strategy. However, this claim invites other types of boundary problems. All social science might be regarded as ultimately comparative in the sense that observed phenomena are compared against a certain point of reference, which is either explicitly stated or implicitly assumed, and which allows differences and similarities to be analysed, interpreted or evaluated. If that is the case, is there anything distinctive about cross-national research as opposed to other forms of research strategies? This question has been extensively deliberated on in texts on methods within comparative and cross-national social research (Ragin, 1987, 1991; Kohn, 1989; Oyen, 1990; Hantrais and Mangen, 1996; Hantrais, 2008). Without rehearsing the arguments made there, a conservative response might point to particular and compounding methodological problems when it comes to generating comparable data, identifying appropriate functional equivalents and achieving an adequate sensitivity towards the different historical and cultural contexts in which national social policies are embedded. In other words, as with other forms of comparative research, the distinctive feature of comparative social policy is to be found within its methodological aspects rather than its substantive nature.

Comparative social policy analysts should be explicit about the ways in which they conceptualize and operationalize countries as units of analysis. Comparisons might be made between two or more cases or cover a large number of countries, for example all member states of the UN. Analyses of the latter type are generally based on statistical methods, and thus tend
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To conceptualize countries as representing a particular set of quantifiable variables, such as levels of GDP, social spending, income inequality or mortality rates. Hence, as Ragin (1991) points out, the analysis within these ‘large-N’ studies are constructed as co-variations between these generally few variables, while countries as entities beyond these variables tend to disappear. In contrast, ‘small-N’ studies tend to treat countries as multi-dimensional backgrounds for comparing the content of, or change within, particular social policy programmes or welfare states as a whole. In other words, the latter type of research conceptualizes national social policies as embedded within different, and not always quantifiable, social, political, economic, cultural and ideological contexts that impinge on the shape and impact of particular social policies.

Esping-Andersen (2000) has argued for ‘intentional and purposeful empiricism’ that combines ‘cross-sectional’ with what he calls ‘diachronic’ comparisons (that is, comparing the present with particularly distinctive time periods in the past) as the most useful research strategy in macro-societal investigations that are grappling with the emergence of new societal equilibria. The approach of ‘confronting extremes in the past with vanguards of the future’ (ibid., p. 75), he argues, is particularly appropriate at times like this, which, as is widely agreed, is a time of rapid social change that makes it hard to analyse the shape of society to come.

Indeed, it has to be noted that comparative social policy research, or other types of comparative social research, are not necessarily cross-national in nature. The provision of social services in a particular region, for example, might be compared over time rather than across countries. Also, the nation-state might be an inappropriate unit for a cross-sectional analysis. For some purposes countries might be too small (e.g., analysing the role of Catholicism on social policy formation), for others too large (e.g., studying the impact of cultural factors on the provision of social care within India). Depending on the particular aim of a comparative study, subnational entities (local authorities, regions, federal states) or supranational organizations (such as the EU) might be the more appropriate unit of analysis. Indeed, much research that has been labelled cross-national or cross-country is in fact a comparison of particular (and not necessarily representative) regions or towns within different countries. There are often good methodological reasons for such a strategy, and as long as these are made explicit there is no problem with such an approach.

In their review of the literature, Wilensky et al. (1987, p. 382) defined only those studies as comparative social policy that had systematically covered ‘the same phenomena in two or more countries’. Such an approach excludes comparatively oriented case studies and systematic investigations of social policies in single countries. Yet, as Ragin (1987,
p.4) puts it with reference to major classical sociological texts by Alexis de Tocqueville or Emile Durkheim, ‘many area specialists are thoroughly comparative because they implicitly compare their chosen case to their own country or to an imaginary but theoretically decisive ideal-type case’. Indeed, particularly early texts on social policy arrangements in a country different from the author’s own have helped to broaden the horizon and inspired new reflections on domestic forms of social policy delivery, principles and impacts. However, over the past three decades the ease of accessing information – that is, in English – about national social policy arrangements and changes therein has considerably improved, due to comparisons of specific social policy fields in a small number of countries (e.g., Kautto et al., 1999, 2001; Bonoli, 2000; Clasen, 2005; Palier, 2010) as well as better systematic information and data made available by supranational agencies such as the EU or the OECD. Thus, while some single-country-based analyses of social policy will continue to be of scholarly value, their inclusion as a form of comparative social policy seems to stretch the notion too far.

At the same time, just because a study might cover data and information from more than one country does not make it comparative in any explicit sense. There are many books that describe, discuss or even analyse social policy instruments, outcomes and policy developments in a number of countries, with individual chapters devoted to particular countries. Although providing a flavour of recent national policy developments, often these texts lack criteria that would make them comparative in any analytical sense. For example, series of disparate country chapters often come without a common analytical framework, systematic structure or even set of common topics covered. There is little attempt to introduce central concepts or a discussion of how these have been operationalized throughout the book and, subsequently, little synthesis of the material or effort to draw comparative conclusions. On a positive note, the number of books and articles that are published each year and that meet these criteria has grown considerably. In part this has been assisted by the growth of outlets for comparative social policy writing. Within a European context, for example, a number of academic journals have now become established, such as the Journal of European Social Policy, the European Journal of Social Security, European Societies, or the Journal of European Social Work. In addition, in 2002 a European network for social policy analysis was established (ESPAnet), which has become a firm platform for the promotion of particularly comparative research across Europe, followed by the introduction of an East Asian Social Policy Research Network (EASP) in 2005. These developments have helped to raise the profile of comparative social policy and are indications of the growing internationalization of the field.
THE GROWTH OF COMPARATIVE SOCIAL POLICY

In the 1960s, and even the 1970s, the idea of producing a handbook on comparative social policy might have seemed strange. This was the time of early explicit comparative writing on, first, social administration (Rodgers et al., 1968) and later social policy (e.g., Kaim-Caudle, 1973; Rodgers et al., 1979), which devoted relatively little space to contemplating whether studying social policy across countries involved any specific conceptual, methodological or theoretical considerations. Instead, driven by the idea that there is considerable knowledge and insight to be gained from looking across countries, these pioneers of comparative social policy briefly designed an analytical framework and then proceeded with ‘constructive descriptions’ (Stebbing in Rodgers et al., 1979, p. xii) and intensive country-by-country discussions of social policy programmes, aims and delivery. This systematic empirical engagement with social policy principles and their manifestations in a range of countries was valuable at the time but, due to the dynamic nature of social policy, many aspects were quickly outdated. Also, there were very few comparative studies of a few countries that made any claims to theoretical advancement. Heclo’s seminal book (1974) on differences and similarities in the development of unemployment insurance and pension programmes in the UK and Sweden was one of the rare exceptions in the 1970s. Similarly intensive comparative accounts of social policy developments within developed welfare states followed only in the 1980s, now originating within collaborative research frameworks, such as the one developed by Peter Flora and colleagues, which produced landmark publications (Flora and Heidenheimer, 1981; Flora, 1986).

The core explanatory variables in these studies were changes in national ‘welfare efforts’, that is, the relative share of the national product that is devoted to social policy programmes, as well as broad patterns of welfare state development indicated by the timing of social policy legislation and the growth in programme coverage. The interest in these dependent variables links them to earlier studies conducted in the 1960s and 1970s, which, based on statistical observations, argued that the emergence and development of welfare states has to be regarded as a response to socio-economic pressures developed within industrialized societies and growing capacities to meet demands (Cutright, 1965; Wilensky, 1975). In the 1970s and 1980s, this line of argument was superseded by those that pointed to political factors, and in particular the strength of organized labour, as a crucial variable of welfare state expansion (see Shalev, 1983).

None of the authors within this strand of social policy analysis felt the need to stress the comparative nature of their work. Instead, extending
the analysis of the causes for the emergence and growth of welfare states from single nation to a cross-national arena was treated as a method of testing and advancing the robustness of theoretical propositions. Indeed, for this distinctive tradition of macro-comparative welfare state research (for reviews see van Kersbergen, 1995; Pierson, 1998; Amenta, 2003), comparative social policy is neither a discipline nor a substantive focus or field of study as such, but a methodological device or necessity. As Esping-Andersen (1993, p. 124) put it, ‘the macro-comparison of welfare states immediately implies cross-national research designs’.

The current version of this ongoing debate about explanations of welfare state development points to diversity and the coexistence of several paths towards post-industrialism in accordance with the notion of welfare state regimes (Esping-Andersen, 1990), and to the affinity and interdependence between national social policy arrangements and other policy sectors, such as industrial relations, labour market policy or financial markets, as well as other societal arrangements regarding the role of families and households (Esping-Andersen, 1999, 2009; Ebbinghaus and Manow, 2001). Pursuing similar questions but concentrating on a few countries, other studies have restricted themselves to comparative investigations of whole welfare states belonging to a particular type or regime (e.g., van Kersbergen, 1995; Kautto et al., 1999 and 2001; Palier, 2010) or to the development of particular social policy programmes over time, such as unemployment protection (Clasen, 1994), pensions (Bonoli, 2000) or health policy (Freeman, 2001).

In parallel to this focus on examining policy development, another strand of more evaluative cross-national analysis developed in the early 1980s. These were studies that investigated the impact of social policy on particular groups (e.g., Bradshaw and Piachaud, 1980) or focused on particular problems, such as poverty (Walker et al., 1983). Later, the developments of new and improved datasets, such as the Luxembourg Income Study or the European Community Household Panel, provided more robust empirical bases for comparative research in this sub-set of comparative social policy, spurning new studies on, for example, the impact of national income transfer programmes (Mitchell, 1991) or the effect of unemployment on individuals and families (Gallie and Paugam, 2000).

As Higgins (1986) pointed out at the time, in the 1980s these two types of comparative social policy research were still quite distinct from each other. However, what they had in common was their focus on industrialized countries with sizeable welfare state programmes, largely ignoring the, by the 1980s, growing amount of social policy research in developing countries. While much of contemporary comparative social policy might
still not have fully rectified this, the adoption of a ‘narrow rather than inclusive approach’ (Jones Finer, 1999) has become much more questionable due to the growth of research on social policy in countries outside of the OECD, some of which was already explicitly comparative in nature more than 20 years ago (e.g., MacPherson and Midgley, 1987). This emergence of several branches of comparative social policy analysis and the proliferation of cross-national analyses within social policy reached a level that already in the 1980s seemed sufficient to warrant textbooks in the field (e.g., Jones, 1985), as well as literature reviews (e.g., Wilensky et al., 1985), and that sparked off the adoption of explicitly cross-national perspectives within particular theoretical approaches on social policy, such as feminist writing (Dominelli, 1990).

In 1990 Esping-Andersen’s seminal book on welfare capitalism was published and impinged on much comparative social policy for subsequent decades. Building on earlier categorizations of welfare states (Titmuss, 1974), Esping-Andersen’s typology was original in the sense that it was derived from a systematic empirical investigation of similarities and differences across developed industrialized countries at the time. Praised as well as criticized on methodological, theoretical and conceptual grounds, it has remained a major reference point. Debates continue about the sense or nonsense of constructing clusters of welfare states, about the appropriateness of indicators for such typologies, about the number of categories, about the epistemological character of welfare regimes (ideal types or actual systems), about the assignment of particular countries to a particular welfare state type and about the dynamic or static nature of welfare regimes (see Abrahamson, 1999; Arts and Gelissen, 2002; and, unfortunately only for readers of German, the excellent collection by Lessenich and Ostner, 1998).

These debates have impacted on both the evaluative and the more theoretically inclined camps of comparative social policy. The notion of welfare regimes has made it more difficult to maintain social spending as the ‘proxy’ variable for social policy (Esping-Andersen, 1993) and the use of other indicators of welfare, such as social rights, has encouraged a debate on the appropriateness of different ‘dependent variables’ for measuring and capturing the nature of change across welfare states (Clasen and Siegel, 2007). At the same time, the publications of more in-depth but largely descriptive or evaluative accounts of national social policy programmes and their effects has become rather limited without making at least some attempt to justify theoretically the selection of countries, and to connect individual country analyses to a wider conceptual framework that would allow inferences about, for example, causes for social policy convergence or divergence. This is not to say that the boundaries between the two
strands have ceased to exist or that a sufficient degree of cross-fertilization has already been achieved. However, some convergence has occurred and methodological and conceptual progress has been made along the lines that Alber et al. (1987, p. 468) suggested in the 1980s. Databases for comparative social policy have been improved and much comparative work has accumulated that allows for a better mapping of similarities and differences in national paths of welfare state development. Equally, the focus on (path dependent or otherwise) welfare reform of social policy arrangements has provided a new theoretical impetus. Finally, the call for enhancing aggregate data analyses with more historically and contextually sensitive analyses and case studies seems to have been received by an increasing number of writers in the field.

CONCLUSION

Attempting to define comparative social policy seems somewhat fruitless. Sharp distinctions are difficult to make. Academics will continue to discuss what exactly might constitute social policy vis-à-vis other policy fields and whether it is an academic discipline or a field of study. The overlap with other areas of comparative analysis (particularly comparative public policy) is substantial, while the methodological problems of analysing policies across countries or over time are not particular to social policy but inherent in any form of comparative social research. Yet the difficulty of exactly mapping the boundaries of comparative social policy does not mean that it has little chance of developing. On the contrary, the chapter has tried to indicate that there are several parallel discourses and analytical frames of reference, aims and approaches that can broadly be subsumed under the rubric of comparative social policy and that have emerged and evolved over time.

Since the early 1980s, these strands have developed and thrived, as indicated by the emergence of literature reviews, textbooks and the diversification into even more branches in the field. Initially without much contact between them, to some extent comparative social policy analysis continues to co-evolve along different paths. But there is now more mutual recognition, more cross-references are being made and some attempts towards the bridging of gaps (e.g., by combining theoretical macro-analyses of welfare state reform with case studies, or by enhancing research on the development of particular programmes with evaluative comparative analysis). The distance between the different strands seems to have diminished, which can only be a good sign for the future of comparative social policy.
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