

1. Introduction

Comparative social policy makes demands on lecturers and students.

Doing comparative social policy can overlap significantly with other courses or modules. It can help to see the areas of overlap in terms of 'portable elements' that students might have engaged with already:

- How to compare - being able to identify, locate, select, analyse and evaluate different kinds of evidence.
- The social, political and economic contexts of different countries.

Students will bring different levels of knowledge and understanding of these elements to a course in comparative social policy, and it can be helpful to:

- Give students some idea of the assumptions that are being made about what they already know.
- Do a quick check at the start of a course to find out what students understand about making comparisons between countries and what they know about the differences between countries. There are various websites which can be used, e.g. www.aneki.com, which provides lists of all kinds of differences between countries, (however, do be aware of the site's origins of information). It can provide the basis for a 'quick quiz' or for something a bit more demanding, such as a discussion of reasons for differences between countries or the evaluation of sources.

2. Approaches to teaching comparative social policy: starting with evidence and methodological issues

Comparative social policy has proved especially useful for linking theoretical and methodological issues, as any attempt to compare involves both definitions of 'welfare' and the construction of evidence about its production and consumption. Some approaches start with the evidence and methodological issues; others prefer to start out with theoretical constructs or models. Both approaches have advantages, but can lead to the same learning outcomes.

Handling quantitative evidence

Students might be asked to find, interpret and evaluate quantitative evidence for cross-national comparisons. Some of these sources are listed in the [references section](#), alternatively use the search facility from this site. The widespread use of these kinds of evidence raises some important methodological and theoretical questions, such as:

- What is the basis for defining and calculating both 'social' and 'welfare' spending? Why are food and transport programmes, for example, not included?
- Why do patterns of spending vary? Students' speculations about reasons for variations between countries can be compared to theories, such as those of [Wilensky \(1975\)](#) or [Flora & Heidenheimer \(1981\)](#), which tend to emphasise the similarities.
- Do similar levels of expenditure imply similar forms of welfare? If not, why not?

Evaluating the sources

Most of the organisations that produce quantitative evidence, such as the World Bank, the UN or OECD, also seek to have an influential role in policy formation. This has become the focus for high profile campaigns from new social movements (such as the action at the Seattle and Genoa 'summits'). It may be that these confrontations are more important for their symbolic value than their impact on the policy agendas of the organisations, and they clearly have a wider focus than conventional social policy. The 'clash of visions', though, provides a framework for some critical appraisal of the role of the organisations in policy formation. Comparing the visions of the pro- and anti-capitalist organisations (for example [George et al 2001](#)), as well as their sources of evidence, can provide a more accessible route into some of the arguments about evidence, theory and the links between them.

Using qualitative evidence

Most of the available evidence is quantitative, but the 'cultural turn' in social policy, together with the more widespread use of cyberspace is opening up new possibilities for considering, and even producing, qualitative evidence. [Chamberlayne's](#) (1996, 2001) research on informal care in Germany and Britain is one example of the influence of cultural studies in social policy. Beyond that, there is a world of possibilities in building links of various kinds with institutions in other countries. Some of these have been tried through the [EU SOCRATES programme](#), and have involved the use of Blackboard as a means of allowing students to exchange ideas and information. The kinds of evidence about welfare provision that students might collect from these sources can be a sharp contrast with the quantitative evidence. Rather than getting lost in the argument about which is the 'better' evidence, the patterns of difference that appear in the statistics can generate questions about what these differences mean in terms of everyday experiences of welfare entitlement and provision. These questions might form the basis for investigation through either correspondence or exchange visits. In the end, a good test of students' understanding of similarities and differences between welfare entitlement and provision in different countries is to ask where they would prefer to be ill/educated/unemployed etc. and why.

3. Approaches to teaching comparative social policy: starting with theoretical models

The big advantage of starting with some models is that they give students some reference points from which to handle and interpret the evidence. While [Esping-Anderson](#) (1990) and his critics are the obvious starting points for many, it is worth checking just what students understand about the usefulness and limitations of models in general.

Typologies

[Esping-Anderson's](#) (1990) typology of 'welfare regimes' generate questions such as:

- How to define and operationalise measures of welfare?
- How well do 'welfare regimes' capture the differences of both policy formation (the link to values and principles) and of policy outcomes (the effects for socially differentiated populations)?
- How useful are models as conceptual tools, compared to the insights offered by individual case studies, either of whole societies or of areas of policy across different societies?
- [Esping-Anderson's](#) (1990) use of the terms 'liberal' and 'conservative' can sometimes be a problem for British students, who associate them with the particular context of British political parties. Once the key features of each 'regime' are understood, however, it can be helpful to develop this by asking students to predict what they would expect to find in, for example, the benefits system of a liberal country. In this way, the third of the questions listed above can be tested and students drawn into the

important arguments about the links between theoretical models and empirical evidence.

[Esping-Anderson's](#) (1990) typology has attracted some criticism ([Lewis \(2000\)](#); [Williams \(2001\)](#)) for its attention to class at the expense of other forms of social differentiation and inequality (gender, race). Given some evidence on patterns and forms of welfare in different countries, students can be asked to generate typologies of their own in relation to particular social groups.

Developing cognitive and study skills

The link between the construction of evidence and the construction of models is a key issue for students, whatever the approach to teaching comparative social policy. This involves the development of a wider set of cognitive skills and study skills of:

- assessing the empirical adequacy of a model
- being able to gauge the degree of comprehensiveness of a model
- identifying assumptions contained in models
- evaluating the coherence of arguments based on models built on empirical evidence.

All of these might be illustrated by other examples such as [Charles Murray's \(1984, 1990\)](#) claims about welfare dependency in the USA and the UK. Good models generate more interesting questions than answers. This is partly to do with the inevitable lack of fit between the ideal typical characteristics of models and the empirical realities they try to capture, and partly with the fact that welfare is a contested and dynamic set of processes.

4. Challenges posed by comparative social policy

Challenge	Points to consider
Depth vs. breadth	The range of material that could potentially be drawn into teaching social policy means that there has to be some trade off between generalisation and complexity. This need not be a problem so long as the constraints imposed by these two factors is made explicit. Rather than trying important questions about the ways in which evidence is shaped by the kinds of questions that are posed about similarities and differences between 'welfare states'. Also, that the use of one kind of evidence frequently generates questions that are more likely to find answers from other kinds of evidence.
Availability of sources	While there is a huge amount of evidence, it may be more difficult to find for non OECD countries, and it may not always be available in English.
Rapid social change	May be more apparent in some areas of welfare, because of their relationship to the public sphere. Teachers may be put off using comparative social policy because of the difficulty of keeping abreast of, or being unable to assess the significance of changes in policy in so many different countries. The availability of more information more easily through cyberspace may exacerbate this feeling of being overwhelmed.
Links to wider social theory	Social policy students, especially those on modular courses, may not all have such a well-developed understanding of current debates in social theory that link into comparative social policy. Globalisation theory is one example where some students will have more knowledge than others, or they may have come to their understanding of 'globalisation' through a number of different routes. What this means is that if comparative social policy is going to appear connected to wider live debates about changes within and between societies, teachers may well have to provide some

	abridged version of the debates about this topic.
Differences between countries vs. differences within countries	Linked to the above point, and because most evidence tends to be 'cross-national', comparative social policy may tend to conceal intra-country differences. This problem might be addressed in part by including evidence that compares such differences (eg levels of inequality, coverage, take-up rates etc.).
Assessment strategies	This can undoubtedly be a challenge, especially in the context of students' expectations. Comparative social policy lends itself to a range of assessment strategies, and it can help to devise the whole course around group or individual assignments involving a range of tasks, such as locating and evaluating evidence, comparing whole countries or policy areas in two or three countries, making use of theoretical models etc. The problem is to avoid assessment overload with too many tasks.
The 'brand' image of comparative social policy	The name 'comparative social policy' is not the most exciting, bearing in mind the issues that it opens up and the different ways in which international and global relationships are conceptualised. It may be that there are better ways of presenting the wealth of material, empirical and theoretical, that students are being invited to engage with.

5. References

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Additional reading list

- Bradshaw J et al 1993 A Comparative Study of Child Support in Fifteen Countries. *Journal of European Social Policy*, 3 (4) 255-271.
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