

Audio Transcription

Hartley Dean - What is Social Policy?

Hi, my name is Hartley Dean and I'm from the London School of Economics and I teach Social Policy and I'm often asked well what is Social Policy? Not everybody is altogether clear of what social policy is as an academic subject. It's worth saying first of all, what it's not - it isn't a branch of sociology, it's much more than that, certainly it draws on sociology, sociology is very important. It isn't training for social work or for public sector management, although it is incredibly useful to have an academic background for those things and it isn't the study of dismal social problems and all the rest of it. Social problems are certainly a part of what social policy has to look at but I like to think of social policy as being much more than that as being very much to do with the study of human well-being if you like, the systems that are necessary to sustain human well-being, the social relations upon which human well-being really depend and not just for human survival but for human flourishing as it were. So to that extent, the scope of social policy as an academic subject is pretty infinite. So it's certainly big bucks if you think about it, in a country like the UK about two-thirds of all public spending, that's big money, is spent on what we can call social policy. That's about a quarter of gross domestic products of all the money that is made in this country, this is big stuff, but at the same time it's also about the minutiae about everyday lives. It's what it is required for us to be able to live a good life, we all need health, we all need to be healthy, we need an education, we need decent housing, we need jobs, we need money, when we get older we need pensions and so on. But we also need things like identity and security and fundamentally social policy is the study of how we care for how we care about each other in a society of interdependent human beings and that can be achieved through government on the one hand but it's also achieved on an everyday basis within our families, within communities. Non-governmental organisations can have a lot to do with the provision of social policy, particularly in developing countries for example. So, we're concerned with how to understand all those processes and to understand them critically. The important thing about social policy is that yes, it is a social science, it is a social science subject that is essentially interdisciplinary, multi-disciplinary. We draw on a range of different social sciences, I often like to say social policy academics and social policy students doesn't mean that their butterflies flitting aimlessly from idea to idea. We're much more like magpies, we're ruthless, we're promiscuous, we raid the social sciences for whatever ideas are actually useful in order to explore the problems associated with policy making in the pursuit of human well-being. So, yes we draw on economics because we want to know who gets what in society, we draw on politics because we want to know who's in control of all this stuff. We draw on sociology because yes we are concerned about the complexity of human society, the multiple divisions in human society is the conflict and conflicting interests and yes indeed that's business about social problems but remembering that some of the social problems that we are concerned with at policy level are the problems actually created by society, created by social policy provision itself often, it's important to remember that social policy is very much a critical, analytical,

rigorous sort of subject, or be it there for people who feel passionately about various problems in society be it social poverty or injustice or whatever it may actually be.