

Audio Transcript

Pete Alcock – How do we study Social Policy?

Julia Waldman: How do we study Social Policy?

Professor Pete Alcock: So when we were looking at those things we were looking at I say not at one set of actors or one set of institutions but I suppose there are two broad dimensions to how we study and actually probably why we study social policy too and the first is what you might call the normative dimension and that is engaging with the theories, the principles and the values that underlie social policy, what is it we're trying to achieve, what do we mean by welfare, what do we mean by terms like justice, equality, care, and indeed health and education so we look at those, we look at the key terms we're dealing with, we look at the theories and principles that underpin those. And that includes in particular embracing the importance of ideologies, the way in which ideologies structure, the way in which we think about things because of course we don't all agree on what is justice, we don't all agree on what is ideology. There are political differences, there are policy differences and indeed there are moral differences and those theoretical debates and conceptual debates are very important so we need to understand values and we need to understand the values of contested and debated that's part of what you study. The other dimension in social policy area is what you might call the empirical dimension, okay values exist but at the same time we do want to find out about what is happening, how healthcare is delivered, how education is delivered, how it works on the ground and how it's working and so another dimension of the study of social policy is what we might loosely call empirical research looking at people who have studied the way hospitals deliver cancer care for example, who have studied the way in which schools teach people A level subjects or the way in which universities recruit. And we need to gather that information we need to understand the research procedures, the research methods by which we gather the data, we need to know what's good and bad research and there's all sorts of intellectual and organizational ways in which we judge what's good and what's bad research. And we also need to look at the relationship between that empirical knowledge the data that we gather and how that feeds into the policy process. And there's been particular interest in that in recent years probably captured by the phrase which politicians use these days 'evidence based practice' and the idea that policy change should be evidence based. In other words when we want to introduce a new kind of healthcare or new kind of educational provision, we should use the evidence, the empirical evidence that's been gathered about what's worked in the past and what hasn't worked in the past.

So actually, that empirical evidence should also drive policy development. So when we study social policy were studying the values that underpin it and drive it and were studying empirical evidence about how it works, whether it works and how we might therefore change it.