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New Themes in International Social Welfare: Introduction

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This introductory article provides a brief overview of developments in international social welfare paying particular attention to the major themes which have characterized the field. It summarizes the new themes reflected in the contributions to the special issue, noting that they are indicative of future directions for international social welfare investigation.

Although this special issue of the *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare* is concerned with new themes in international social welfare, the field itself is hardly new. Social welfare institutions in different societies have been analyzed and compared for many years. However, much comparative social welfare research has been undertaken by sociologists and political scientists who have been more interested in testing theoretical propositions and reviewing cross national statistical trends than examining social welfare interventions. Comparative studies in the applied social welfare field are still relatively underdeveloped.

In recent years, those working in the applied fields of social policy and social work have become much more active in international research. Comparisons of different approaches to social policy, different types of human service provisions and different forms of intervention are now undertaken with greater frequency than before. Until recently, very little had been published on social work education and practice in different countries, but more literature on the subject is now available. In social work, attempts have been made to foster the internationalization of the professional curriculum and there is a greater interest in learning from the experiences of colleagues in other nations (Estes, 1992; Healy, 1993; Hokenstad, Khinduka & Midgley, 1994; Midgley, 1990).

These developments suggest that an international perspective is becoming more widely accepted in social policy and social work. Once regarded as an exotic activity practiced by a few hardy adventurers, many more social workers and social administrators now have international knowledge which they incorporate into their professional activities. Similarly, the expansion of international activities has also engendered a greater awareness of cultural diversity issues, fostered a tendency to compare policies and practice approaches more critically, and generally facilitated the positive exchange of ideas and experiences.

The Field of International Social Welfare

International social welfare research is multifaceted, dealing with many different issues. The range of topics covered is substantial. As the entry in the most recent issue of the *Encyclopedia of Social Work* (Midgley, 1995) revealed, international social welfare research has dealt with issues as varied as comparative social expenditures, the cross-cultural replication of practice approaches in social work, the need for a developmental perspective in social policy and the role of international agencies in promoting global social welfare.

A large number of countries and regions of the world have been covered by this research. Sometimes, one society is used as a case study; in other instances, two countries are compared and sometimes data for a large number of nations are analyzed. In the past, international social welfare research tended to focus on the Western industrial countries and frequently comparisons were made between the United States, Britain, Sweden and a few other European nations. Today, many more societies are included and studies of social policy and social work in many different industrial countries are available. These studies increasingly transcend the descriptive case study approach which characterized much formative research in the field. Today, social policy studies often cover several nations examining broad aspects of social policy (Cochrane and Clark, 1993; Friedmann, Gilbert and Sherer, 1987; Gould, 1993; Jones, 1985). In addition, since the 1980s, several studies of social policy in the developing countries have been published (MacPherson, 1982; Hardiman and Midgley, 1982; MacPherson and Midgley, 1987; Jones, 1990).

Because of its complexity, attempts to excavate the themes embodied in this research are faced with formidable difficulties. So many issues, problems and topics are covered that any attempt at classification is likely to be incomplete. Midgley's (1995) review of the major themes in international and comparative social welfare identified five topics which have preoccupied investigators working in the field. These topics include first, a concern with assessing social need in different societies; second, comparative studies of the social services in different countries; third, attempts to construct typologies of welfare states; fourth, studies of the origins and functions of social policies and fifth, speculative commentaries on the future of the welfare state. In addition, applied research is now undertaken more frequently than before. There have been more studies of social work practice and educational trends in different countries; greater efforts to collaborate internationally in social welfare; and renewed interest in social development as an internationally useful approach to social welfare.

As this review suggests, research into international social welfare can be divided into descriptive, theoretical, normative and applied domains. Much comparative social welfare research has been descriptive in that it has sought to provide useful narrative accounts of the way the social services in different countries are organized and operated. Descriptive research has led the way to normative evaluations of the way social welfare institutions function and of their effectiveness in meeting social welfare goals. Explanatory studies have tested theoretical propositions about the origins of social policies and social service provisions, their functions in society and their relationship to wider economic and political institutions. These studies permit generalizations abstracted from the experience of one society to be tested more widely. Applied international social welfare research has been concerned with the application of findings to policy planning, program implementation, social service delivery and similar issues.

It has already been noted that applied research is now more popular in international social policy investigation. A primary purpose of this research has been to utilize the experiences of other countries for the purpose of introducing new social provisions or modifying and improving existing provisions. Previously, a good deal of applied social welfare research resulted

in the uncritical replication of western approaches in the developing countries. However, as critics exposed the inappropriateness of this practice, more discerning transfers have taken place (Martinez-Brawley & Delevan, 1993; Midgley, 1981, 1984). With appropriate care, applied international social welfare research can bring real benefits as countries engage in positive reciprocal exchanges of information and experiences.

New Themes in International Social Welfare

Despite the expansion of international social welfare research in recent years, there is considerable scope for the further enhancement of the field. The progress made in extending the geographic scope of international studies needs now to be augmented by a commitment to expand into new subject terrains. As in other academic fields, there has been a tendency among international social welfare investigators to perpetuate existing lines of inquiry. While much knowledge builds incrementally on previous research, a relatively new field of endeavor such as international social welfare can benefit from more adventurous excursions into neglected areas.

This idea formed the basis for this special issue of the journal. By publishing material on new themes in international social welfare, the journal hopes to encourage original thinking and the dissemination of new ideas. As far as possible, submissions were selected for making an innovative contribution or for emphasizing some aspect of recent trends in the subject. While some of the articles may be judged by readers to be more novel than others, all deal with issues that will expand the field or take international social welfare research in new directions.

The new themes reflected in the articles in the special issue deal with issues as varied as the cross-national diffusion of innovations, the neglect of the Third World in comparative social policy research, minorities and cultural diversity issues, feminist and gender perspectives in international social welfare, the need for a developmental approach in social policy and social work, and the growing significance of market-based social policy interventions.

The electoral successes of the political right in many countries today has had a major impact on social welfare. One consequence

of this change is the growing role of market-based provisions. Today, the social services in many countries are being privatized and contracting out for services is now commonplace. Two articles in the special issue deal with this trend. Wes Shera examines the role of the market in health and mental health care in Britain and the United States while Morgan Tracy and Martin Tracy review the impact of the new market economy on social security in Poland.

As was noted earlier, the developing countries have traditionally been neglected in international social welfare. Before the 1980s, most studies were pre-occupied with comparing the Western industrial countries and particularly those in North America and Western Europe. This issue is discussed in some depth by Kwong Leung Tang in his article on the marginalization of social welfare in the Third World and the relevance of theory in explaining this phenomenon. A greater focus on the Third World in international social welfare has also fostered an interest in developmental roles for social policy and social work. James Midgley refers to the Third World experience in his attempt to articulate a developmental model of social policy which will transcend the increasingly outmoded debate between residual and institutional approaches. Joyce Kramer and Claude Johnson extend this discussion by considering the relationship between the concepts of sustainable and social development as policy approaches in the new global economy. Shanta Pandey looks at the growing problem of de-forestation, suggesting that it provides an opportunity for social workers to become more involved in developmentally relevant social work practice.

It is only in recent years that gender and minority issues have gained prominence in international social welfare. Since the 1980s, when the first major feminist social policy studies were published, gender issues are now more frequently analyzed. This is also true of research into cultural diversity and minority concerns. Four articles in the issue stress the need to pay adequate attention to gender and minority concerns in international social welfare. Patricia Spakes examines equality and family policy in different countries arguing that a feminist theory of the state is needed to frame the debate. In similar vein, Lena Lundgren-Gaveras examines the work and family needs of single parents with reference to social policy in Sweden and the United States.

Christina Pratt discusses the efforts of Israeli and Palestinian women to respond to ethnic conflict in the Middle East while Miriam Potocky writes about policies for re-settling refugees, many of whom are minorities and the victims of ethnic violence.

Finally, Maria Julia and James Billups discuss the issue of technology transfer in social welfare. Although this issue has long been neglected, much more has been written about the subject in recent years. The authors offer an inclusive overview of the debate and show how appropriate collaboration between social workers can enhance international social development efforts.

The articles in this special issue do not, of course, cover the spectrum of new themes in international social welfare but they show how scholars in the field are addressing previously neglected concerns. The topics addressed in the articles also indicate the future directions research in international social welfare may take. The new themes in international social welfare discussed here will undoubtedly require more discussion. Hopefully, this will further enhance the subject and insure its vitality and relevance in the future.

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