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The Journal of Social Policy turns 50 – Time for reflections and looking to the future

When we began discussing how to mark the 50th anniversary of the Journal of Social Policy, we reflected on how the journal has provided a platform to showcase top-quality research in Social Policy and been a resource to successive generations of academics, practitioners and policy makers. Naturally, Social Policy has changed over the past 50 years – and so has the journal. One of the reasons for a strong continued presence of Social Policy in the UK is its recognition in institutional structures at universities with many standalone departments continuing to provide teaching, research and external engagement recognised under this label.

But Social Policy has not been and can never be a mono-disciplinary field of study. When we look at the colleagues working in the field – and the contributors to our journal – we find a wide array of academic backgrounds, ranging from Sociology to Politics, Geography to Economics, Social Work to History and many more. The inherent interdisciplinarity that marks Social Policy and our journal also means that it connects internationally. While faculty groups on Social Policy exist in a number of countries, the authors writing for this journal find themselves in a broad array of schools and departments, shaped by their respective academic environments. The result is a fascinating exchange of ideas, methods and approaches being used and discussed in the articles we publish. So, while JSP continues to have a strong anchor in the United Kingdom, both its readership and its authors have become drawn from an increasingly diverse range of countries and this is reflected in the nature of the articles carried.

The scope of topics, concepts and methods covered in the Journal of Social Policy nowadays is broad and this is an essential characteristic of our journal. But what continues to connect all the authors, reviewers, editorial board members and the editorial team is a curiosity to understand how policies affect the lives of people within and across countries. That includes macro-perspectives, to examine big trends and patterns, as well as micro-perspectives to examine deeply the perceptions of those designing, implementing or experiencing the outcomes of policies. With this in mind it was clear to us that this anniversary issue should not only look back, but also forward to ask what areas Social Policy research might, or indeed should, consider in the coming years.

The first two articles of this anniversary publication take a look into the past, before we dedicate the majority of the issue to a look into the future. We begin by hearing from those people who shaped the discipline (and many articles in this journal) in a study for which many of them (labelled as “2nd generation of Social Policy academics) were interviewed (Haux). This is followed by an analysis of the place of Social Policy in universities in the UK over the past four decades and how that contested space has changed (Hudson & Lunt).

Afterwards we present seven exciting articles that authors have written on “the future of Social Policy debates”. We invited abstracts under that heading in 2020, asking contributors to critically reflect on emerging areas of interest and/or which debates Social Policy could engage with more than it has in the past. Selected authors underwent our usual rigorous peer review process and the final articles published will hopefully stimulate some constructive discussions. We begin by connecting Social Policy debates to the emerging field of ecosocial policy and ask what role post-growth, post-productivist policy making might play (Murphy & Dukelow). As technological change affects both work and welfare, we then discuss the role of machines in welfare-to-work (McGann et al.) before exploring why a more explicit consideration of digital Social Policy may be beneficial (Henman). Connecting such changing settings in the economy to the experience of people, we then discuss the arguments for a four-day week (Chung) and contemplate whether Social Policy should enhance the focus on public wellbeing rather than mental illness (Fisher). Appreciating that changes in Social Policy do not appear out of nowhere, we proceed by exploring the role of social movements

(Ishkanian) and discuss how Social Policy can widen its scope by better understanding queer lives (Gregory & Matthews). All of these papers will certainly raise more questions than they can directly answer – which is what we asked the authors to do to give us all an opportunity to reflect how we want to develop our own research agendas and collectively the scope of the field further.

We complete the issue with a new type of article for JSP that we are delighted to include – a longer form critical review. The inclusion of larger critical review articles on topics that require a more comprehensive engagement than could be achieved within the scope of a normal article was a goal of the Editorial Team when we took up our role. Working with the JSP editorial board to identify topics of interest we plan to periodically commission and publish these longer form reviews and we hope these will act as critical reflections on the state of evidence on major topics to support the development of new research and advocacy in the respective areas. This anniversary issue is a perfect opportunity to publish the first of these types of articles and especially one focussed on the important contemporary issue of social security benefit sanctions (Pattaro et al.).

We hope you will enjoy this special issue and continue to engage in Social Policy discussions with us and each other through this outlet. JSP is only possible because authors choose to submit their manuscripts to us, reviewers are willing to make the time to provide constructive feedback and members of the editorial board commit to shaping the development of the journal. We want to use this opportunity to thank everyone who has contributed over the years to making JSP the important Social Policy resource that it is. Thank you for your continued interest in the Journal of Social Policy. We look forward to developing it further together.