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10 years of the Journal of International and Comparative Social Policy (2013–2022) – taking stock and charting a route forward

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REVIEW ARTICLE

Editors' introduction: 10 years of the *Journal of International and Comparative Social Policy* (2013–2022) – taking stock and charting a route forward

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Introduction

Over the last 10 years, to no small degree, thanks to the work of the outgoing editors Zoë Irving and Kevin Farnsworth, the *Journal of International and Comparative Social Policy* (hereafter: the Journal) has positioned itself among the leading outlets for international and comparative social policy research.

The Journal has published theoretically, empirically and methodologically insightful research that enhances our understanding of all comparative and international social policy dimensions, including those that focus on national, world regional or global social policies. Articles have dealt with policy processes and welfare outcomes and covered the full range of the “welfare mix” across all major social policy areas. One of the particular strengths of the Journal has been its openness to examine the boundaries between Social Policy and International Development Studies and focus on themes (not uniquely) relevant to understanding social policy in the Global South, such as water, food, transportation and shelter, through critical conversation with existing approaches in international and comparative social policy analysis. Not least, the Journal has strongly encouraged a plurality of theoretical and methodological approaches, including country case studies that locate national welfare systems or specific policy programmes within a comparative or international context. Notably, while the Journal focused on actively propelling the field of inquiry beyond its origins in understanding the development of welfare states in Europe and the Global North, it served as an anchor of contemporary international and comparative social policy scholarship.

As we now take on the baton as incoming editors, we hope to emulate these past successes while charting a route to further developing the Journal. Therefore, this Editors' Introduction aims to seize the opportunity to take stock of the last 10 years (2013–2022) of the Journal and seek concrete avenues for future emphasis under our editorial leadership. To achieve this aim, we subsequently present the findings of a review of all published articles in the Journal covering 10 years from Vol. 29 to Vol. 38 (Part 2). Thereafter, we briefly reflect on how the Journal is positioned against some more general issues within contemporary international and comparative social policy scholarship (Part 3) and chart our vision for the Journal in light of the evidence presented (Part 4). Lastly, we conclude by outlining concrete initiatives through which we hope to achieve our goals as incoming editors of the Journal (Part 5).

Despite the Journal's openness towards approaches outside mainstream social policy analysis, it is also essential to recognise at the outset the extent to which this work is incomplete. As we will demonstrate in this Editors' Introduction, the fact remains that most of the articles published in the

Journal focus on cases, issues and theories that are of primary concern for the study of social policy in the Global North. This imbalance highlights the need to both acknowledge and frontload questions about colonialism/decoloniality, race, gender and their intersections when we study the dynamics of inequality at a global scale. These are reflected not only in the experiences of social policy actors worldwide who are the focus of studies published in the Journal but also in the disciplinary practices within Social Policy academia that define the disciplinary “canon” and its boundaries. As we move forward, we hope to stimulate conversations that actively problematise these assumptions and foster critical debate about the future of Social Policy as a truly global field of study.

10 years of the *Journal of International and Comparative Social Policy*

To take stock of the Journal’s content over the last 10 years, we reviewed all of the published content since the Journal changed its name from the *Journal of International Social Welfare* (2006–2012) to the *Journal of International and Comparative Social Policy* in 2013. During this time, the Journal published 173 articles, including original research articles, research notes, review articles, a public lecture and conference proceedings, and various special issue/themed section introductions. The ten special issues/themed sections included in our review featured a wide range of substantive topics, including gender justice, reflections on the intersection between Social Policy and International Development Studies, critical reflections on the sustainable development goals, the influence of the cold war on welfare state development, social investment, welfare populism, public–private partnerships, public attitudes towards basic income, and regional perspectives from the Western Balkans and Northern America.

When considering the geographical affiliation of the Journal’s authorship, most contributors were based in higher education institutions and research centres in Western Europe (including the United Kingdom; see Figure 1). Authors affiliated with institutions in the Global North, i.e., Western Europe, Eastern Europe, North America and Australia/Pacific, contributed almost eight out of ten articles (79 per cent). Some cross-regional collaborative research articles were published in the Journal, but the overall number remained somewhat limited (13 per cent).

A slightly different picture emerges when considering the world regions covered in all published articles. Indeed, most articles focused on particular countries/groups of countries or geographical regions. Interestingly, the largest share of contributions (42 per cent) showed a cross-regional approach and included analysis of at least two different world regions (North–North, North–South, or South–South). Articles considering Western European cases (26 per cent) remained important, but especially articles focussing on East Asian economies (8 per cent) gained importance relative to the other world regions. This confirms that scholarship on East Asian social policy is no longer confined to institutions in East Asia or, indeed, scholars that originate from East Asian countries/territories. Among the Global North, relatively few articles covered North America, Eastern Europe, and Australia/Pacific (14 per cent). Most notably, however, the combined number of contributions focussing on the Global South excluding East Asia, i.e., South American, Sub-Saharan African, MENA, South and Southeast Asian countries, remained small (8 per cent; see Figure 2).

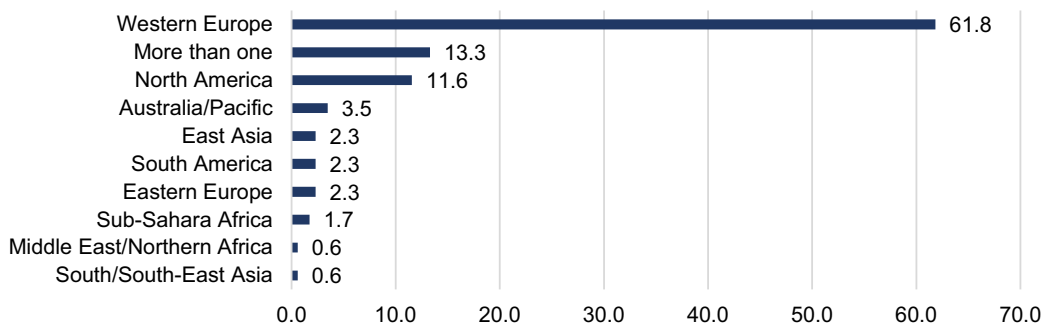


Figure 1. Authors’ institutional affiliation by world region, % of all articles, 2013–2022.

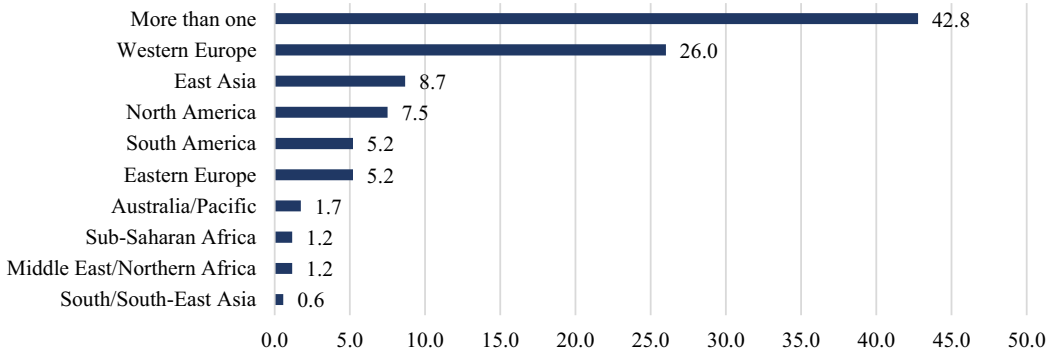


Figure 2. World regions covered, % of all articles, 2013–2022.

Straightforward classification is not always easy, but our review suggests that a larger number of articles (67 per cent) included “nation states” as their primary unit of analysis; contributions with a sub-national or supra-national focus were less frequent in comparison (33 per cent). We also considered whether published articles took a “comparative” approach, i.e., small, medium and large cross-sectional studies that analyse social policy development and change longitudinally or at one moment in time, “international”, i.e., global social policy studies that address various fields of social policy in their transnational or global dimensions, or combinations of “international and comparative” approaches, e.g., comparative case studies within a multilevel governance/scales frame. Overall, more articles took a “comparative” research approach compared to an “international/global” one. However, few articles managed to systematically combine theoretical and methodological approaches across international/global and comparative social policy fields.

Another way to review the content of the Journal over the last 10 years may consider the substantive topics and methods covered in all articles more closely. Regarding the substantive issues being discussed in the Journal, we find that a majority of articles covered social security policies (including old age pensions) (35 per cent) and international development policy (including discussion of SDGs) (24 per cent), respectively. In addition, family and social care and employment policy discussions were also relatively frequent (17 and 12 per cent, respectively). Interestingly, there was a relatively minor focus on health care policy; other important social policy areas, including education, migration, environmental and criminal justice policy, did not gain much attention, while other central social policy issues, such as housing and homelessness, were mainly absent (see Figure 3).

Regarding the pluralism of methodological approaches included in the Journal, there was no discernible methodological bias across all published articles. In other words, conceptual pieces, qualitative methods (interviews, focus groups, discourse analysis), literature reviews (systematic and scoping reviews) and

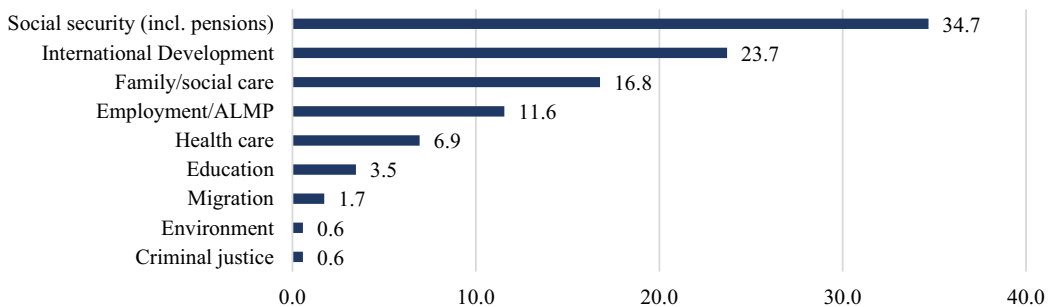


Figure 3. Policy areas covered, % of all articles, 2013–2022.

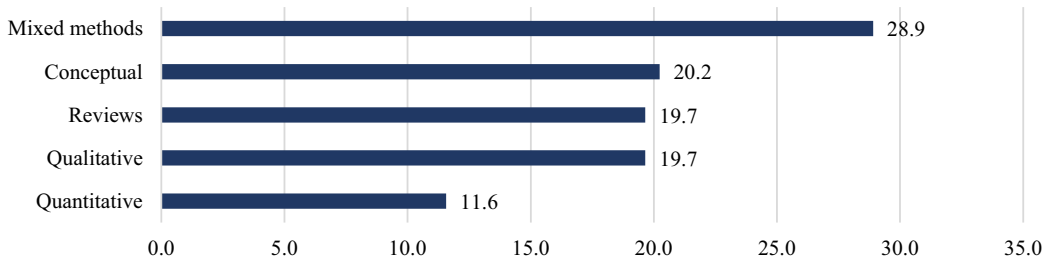


Figure 4. Methodologies used, % of all articles, 2013–2022.

mixed methods approaches (including multi-source case studies and set-theoretic methods) reached a broadly similar share among all the published articles (see Figure 4). On the other hand, purely quantitative articles were relatively less frequent and often included descriptive and multivariate analyses of national and international household surveys and official government statistics (such as EU-SILC, European Social Survey, or Eurostat), but less so those focussing on cases in the “Global South” (such as the ADB Social Protection Index or the World Bank Development Indicators database).

We could not conduct a complete analysis of the various discourses included in the Journal. Nevertheless, a brief analysis of keywords is instructive. A word cloud of the top 200 keywords across all published articles suggests that the Journal was firmly positioned within mainstream social policy analysis (see Figure 5). Indeed, there was a good mix between more traditional social policy issues,

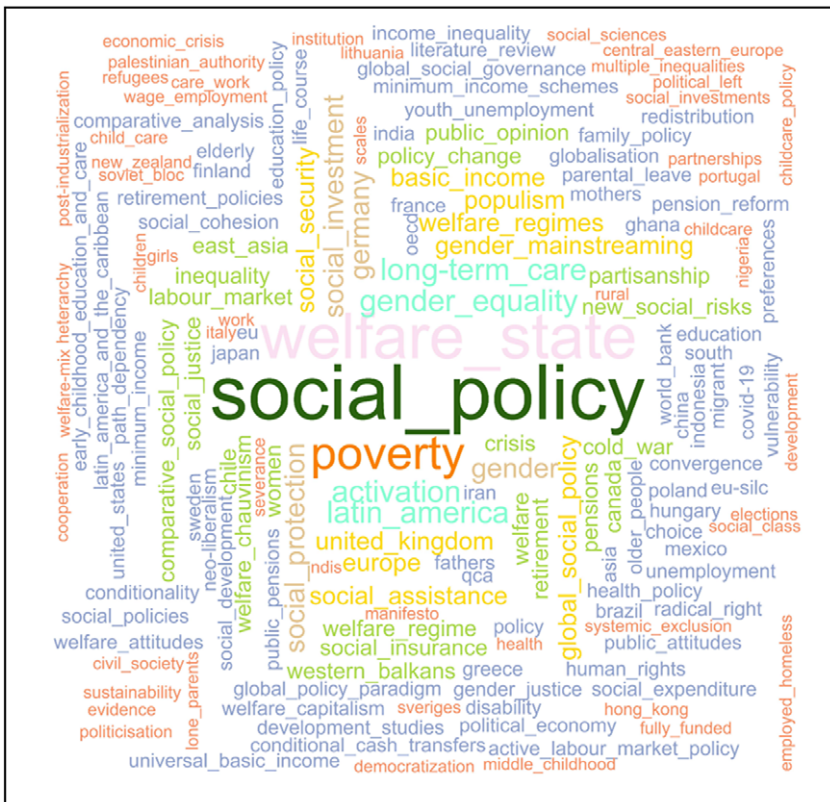


Figure 5. Word cloud of all keywords, top 200 words selected, 2013–2022.

including poverty, inequality, social protection, neoliberalism, welfare regimes, and gender equality, and more recent concepts capturing contemporary trends in social policy scholarship, including social investment, welfare chauvinism, sustainability, and basic income included in the Journal. A similar conclusion can be drawn when considering the specific theoretical approaches used by the authors. For example, a considerable number of articles referenced welfare regime theory (and specifically Esping-Andersen, 1990, of course!) as their starting point or contributed to the related power resource, historical-institutional, and ideational accounts of the implementation and transformation of social structures. Peter Hall’s (1993) conceptualisation of the three orders of institutional change also gained multiple mentions. Other authors responded to the emerging sustainable development and active inclusion paradigms promoted by international organisations or included various sociological perspectives on welfare attitudes, justice, gender mainstreaming, and heterarchies (amongst others).

Lastly, Figure 6 illustrates different emphases of substantive topics when comparing the keywords in articles written by authors affiliated with institutions based in the “Global North” with those from articles where at least one of the authors was from institutions based in the “Global South”. Keywords found in the bottom half of the word cloud, particularly those associated with social policy traditions in the Global North, indicate the areas where research collaborations happen across the North–South boundaries and the country cases related to such collaborative practices. However, rather than depicting a convergent picture, in the main, this suggests diversity in the most pressing research questions that authors from

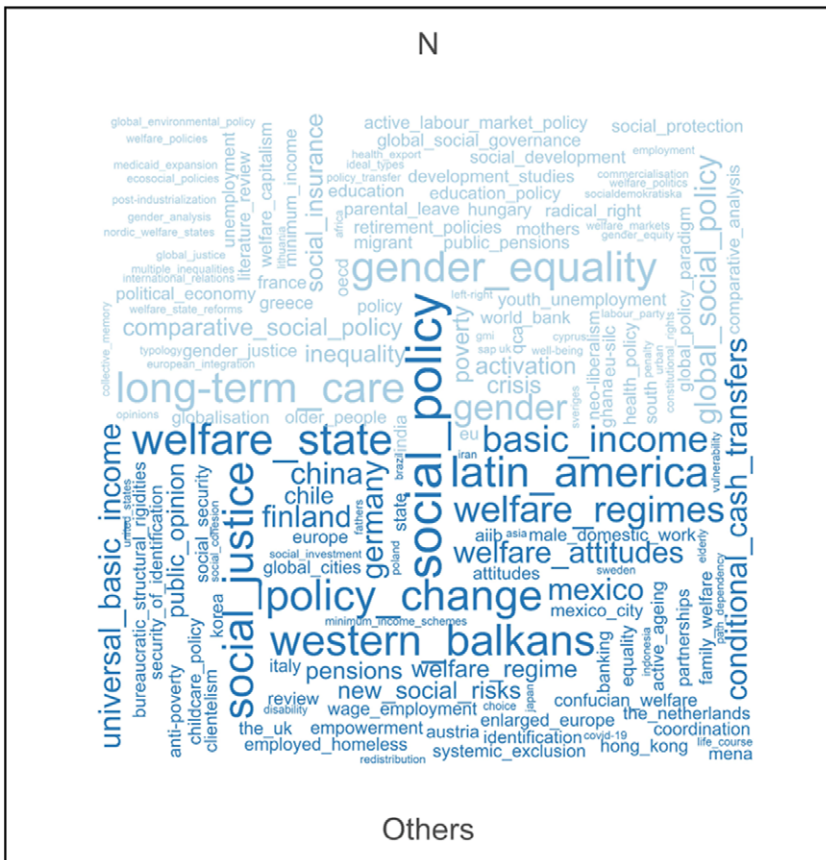


Figure 6. Comparison of word clouds of all keywords by authors’ affiliation, top 200 words selected, 2013–2022. Comparison of articles written by authors affiliated with institutions based in the Global North (light blue) and articles where at least one author was affiliated with an institution based in the Global South (dark blue).

different world regions have tackled. In turn, it may also lend weight to the view that to avoid reinforcing certain biases in the discourse within international and comparative social policy research, the Journal should “rebalance” its authorship by giving voice to scholars from traditionally underrepresented regions.

Situating the journal in international and comparative social policy scholarship

Not all of the above findings are surprising and speak to general challenges and gaps in international and comparative social scholarship. This section aims to briefly sketch classic theories of international and comparative social policy research, to suggest directions for further advancement in theoretical and methodological terms and the role of the Journal therein.

Early research on welfare development focused on structural factors, such as industrialisation and urbanisation, as the main determinants for welfare expansion (usually measured in terms of social expenditure) – aka the “industrialisation thesis”. Yet, subsequent studies suggested that economic growth alone could not account for differences in Europe’s welfare state, capitalist structures, and inequality. Instead, it was argued that politics must be considered to understand how democracies redistribute resources through welfare provisions (the “politics against markets” argument). Since politics matters, the argument went, institutional differences such as welfare states’ degree of “decommodification” and labour movements’ ability to organise collectively to influence policymaking (i.e. the “power resources” theory) were an important consideration alongside the historical-institutional characteristics of political systems and welfare settlements. Notably, Esping-Andersen (1990) captured the different institutional settings of social security policies in three ideal “worlds” of welfare capitalism: social-democratic, liberal, and conservative.

Since then, the welfare modelling literature of the 1990s and 2000s has attempted to integrate this initial welfare regime classification with other world regions (Ferragina & Seeleib-Kaiser, 2011; Kwon, 2005; Powell et al., 2020). However, it has proven challenging to accommodate diverse latecomer welfare systems into a concise, encompassing, and theory-driven classification (Gough, 2004; Roumpakis, 2020). Instead, the emerging state-of-the-art elicited some pessimistic views on possible ways forward for international and comparative social policy analysis: whilst Choi (2007) feared that the modelling literature reached a standstill too early (Choi, 2007), Clasen (1999) opined that attempting to define comparative social policies could be a “fruitless” exercise. Similarly, Mabbett and Bolderson (1999) warned against a possible “overstretching” of theoretical and methodological debates within international and comparative social policy scholarship, which could be “about everything or about nothing”.

Yet, subsequent developments showed that, despite these early concerns, international and comparative social policy research is alive and thriving. Since the 1970s, also due to historical circumstances such as the enlargement of the European Union to the east, the launch of the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) in 2000, or the more global drive to establish social protection floors and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), governments’ interest towards comparative research and international funding opportunities kept expanding worldwide (Hantrais, 2009; Pogge & Sengupta, 2016).

During the past two decades, this promising scenario was further enriched by several landmark social policy reforms and related academic research in latecomer welfare systems, primarily in East Asia, South and Southeast Asia, Latin America, and the ensuing sense of a convergence of the intersections of social policy and international development research (Devine, Kühner, & Nakray, 2015). As a result, old and new generations of social policy scholars have been actively contributing to a growing literature that applies classic and contemporary theories and methods of relevance to international and comparative social policy and international development studies in rapidly changing global contexts.

Many of the most read or cited articles in the Journal have directly added to these various discourses and contributed to new developments in the social policy literature. While some contributions have continued to directly draw on the modelling literature as an enduring mainstay of the field (Fenger, 2018; Fleckenstein & Lee, 2017; Hofäcker & Unt, 2013; Jessoula et al., 2014; Kühner, 2015; Papadopoulos &

Roumpakis, 2013; Yu et al., 2015), others have chartered new possibilities for research by expanding the traditional reach and toolkit of social policy analysis (Gough, 2013) or offering state-of-the-art commentaries on the most pressing social policy issues of our time (Deacon, 2016; Fox Piven, 2015; Koehler, 2016). We consider all these developments an excellent opportunity to further social policy studies from an international and comparative perspective, theoretically and methodologically.

Including more cases for empirical analysis and comparison helps test and challenge pre-existing theories. For example, the classic power resources theory might be ill-suited to explain welfare reform in different world regions. More detail is needed to understand the structure and motivations of trade unions, non-profit organisations, philanthropies, and businesses/social enterprises, combined with their political systems. Theory building is particularly fruitful in the presence of rich contextual case diversity (Hong, *forthcoming*). For example, whilst it is now widely agreed that the “neoliberal” state intervenes in the economy in most instances (Mazzucato, 2015; Piketty, 2013), we have also learned that representative democracy and market capitalism are not a necessary or sufficient condition for welfare development. More theories are needed to explain welfare development in authoritarian and centrally-planned economies. Besides, more nuance is required to understand differences within commonly understood families of nations, welfare geographies or, indeed, welfare regimes. For example, as much as European and even Scandinavian welfare states are not all the same (Greve, 2022; Kvist, 2013), East Asian welfare systems have also been shown to diverge in their welfare institutionalisation, and the speed in which established welfare settlements have been transformed during the last decades (Hong, 2022; Yang & Kühner, 2020).

International and comparative social policy research has much to gain from including a larger pool of political economies in empirical analyses (Hong, *forthcoming*). Here, we would like to highlight three relevant issues for methodological advancement: (1) being explicit in selecting the unit of analysis, (2) improving data comparability, and (3) making good use of old and new methodological approaches in international and comparative research.

First, choosing an appropriate unit of analysis is increasingly vital in all social policy research. For example, as the previous publications in the Journal also attest, international and comparative social policy research has hitherto given lesser attention to the most populous countries worldwide, such as the US, China, India, Indonesia, and Nigeria, and instead used significant energy to capture the essences of small European countries. Including these more populated world areas in international and comparative social policy research would enhance the opportunity for more regional and cross-regional comparisons. National welfare institutions matter, but so do supranational, local governments and city-level governments, suggesting a multi-layered social governance structure and the necessity to investigate welfare and related policies beyond the role of the “nation state” and – not least – to overcome the focus on “state-tistics” in social policy analysis (Hudson & Medrano, 2013). Besides analysing global social policy agreements and structures, it would be possible, e.g., to look into social policies in the US at the state-level or province-level welfare initiatives in China (Hong & Ngok, 2022) or conduct comparisons between major global cities.

The second way forward for methodological advancement is through improving data availability and comparability. Scholars within international and comparative social policy research have been debating the need for more standardised methods to determine how to measure social policy reform, outputs, and outcomes, to facilitate comparison – the so-called “dependent variable problem” (Hong, Kwon, & Kim, 2019; Kühner, 2015). In addition, secondary data from international organisations such as Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the European Union, International Labour Organisation (ILO) or World Bank (amongst others), and international surveys at the micro-level such as International Social Survey Programme (ISSP), World Values Survey (WVS), and General Social Survey (GSS) (amongst others) has encouraged variable-oriented empirical research. Much of these debates and advancements have been concentrated within the macro-comparative social policy literature, but international/global approaches similarly promise to benefit. In turn, besides applying critical conceptual and theoretical tools within international/global social policy (see e.g. Cook & Staab, 2022; Lendvai-Bainton & Stubbs, 2022), comparative social policy in the post Covid-19 era can also find

inspiration in innovative methodological approaches within international/global social policy research in investment and systematically mixing across epistemologies and units of analysis (Mumtaz & Whiteford, 2021).

Attempting to include developing countries in research frameworks may result in low data comparability due to a shortage of harmonised data beyond the OECD group (Yörük et al., 2019). Consequently, comparing economies in the Global North and the Global South can be more difficult due to gaps in affluence, industrialisation and other cultural/historical differences. Yet, we believe that present-day scholars are far better equipped – theoretically and methodologically – and professionally networked to attempt to address these issues through collaborative, cross-regional research. Moreover, although data comparability issues will undoubtedly remain for the foreseeable future, secondary data and policy briefings in latecomer welfare systems are more easily accessible than was previously the case. Seeking to fill these gaps through international and comparative research in qualitative and quantitative terms attests to the importance of these endeavours (Dorlach, 2023; Garritzmann, Häusermann, & Palier, 2022; Wang, Cai, & Gao, 2022).

Finally, international and comparative social policy analysis can benefit from varied and sophisticated methodological approaches, including qualitative, quantitative, or mixed nature. Whilst case studies framed within an international and comparative background still bring important empirical contributions to the field, increasing internationalisation and the ability to create international research groups have encouraged more comparative case studies (notably, the method of agreement and the method of difference). In addition, advancements in quantitative methods such as cross-sectional pooled time-series analysis, cluster analysis, correspondence analysis, latent class analysis, or multilevel analyses; longitudinal qualitative methods; and mixed-methods such as set-theoretic or QCA analyses, facilitate theory testing and development in international and comparative social policy research (Ferragina & Deeming, 2023). The new software development for qualitative and quantitative data analysis – much of which is provided as “open source” – provides a rich background for adopting various methodological approaches.

Throughout its history, the Journal has maintained its international and comparative focus, interest in exploring commonalities with International Development Studies, and its vocation to promote cultural diversity, relativity and awareness among its authors and readership. Building on this tradition, we aim to promote the Journal as a platform to host present-day international and comparative social policy research in a more structured debate form for theoretical, methodological, and policy practice advancement.

Charting a way forward for the journal

In charting the future direction of the Journal, our aims are underpinned by a focus on further enhancing the reputation of the Journal in the field of international and comparative social policy. We remain committed to promoting the existing strengths of the Journal in publishing state-of-the-art comparative social policy research that retains a solid cross-case comparative, international and supranational focus. This has enabled the Journal to be one of the leading outlets for comparative policy and analytical debates among Global North and to advance significant theoretical, methodological and empirical contributions. Additionally, the Journal has hosted significant contributions focusing on the international and supranational analysis of policy debates. We remain committed and welcome manuscripts that deepen research knowledge and analysis among Global North cases and supranational levels of analysis.

It is clear, however, that the focus of the Journal has been primarily on the Global North, both in terms of authorship and thematic coverage. Therefore, we aim to address possible thematic, geographical or conceptual gaps in authorship and thematic coverage. This draws us directly into one of our main aims – to create avenues for a broader community of social policy scholars to publish their work in the Journal, thus extending the thematic, geographic and conceptual coverage beyond its current range. With most articles originating from institutions based in the Global North, and an overwhelming emphasis towards

cases based in Western Europe, there is undoubtedly scope for the Journal to encourage contributions that move beyond Northern or Western conceptual and theoretical tools. However, it is also essential to underscore the fact that our intention in seeking a better North/South balance is not to divert away from the existing attention on Global North and neither that the balance should be achieved in a tokenistic way.

Instead, we intend to enrich the conversation and foster cross-fertilisation across different contributions and approaches. For example, concepts initially developed in the process of studying formal welfare states in the Global North remain highly applicable thinking tools also in the context of the Global South, and vice versa: concepts and approaches more commonly grounded in the analysis of social policy and international development studies in the Global South could be extended in the study of the Global North. In part, this might also involve the need to “provincialise” (Chakrabarty, 2007) the often-privileged role Western experiences play in the analysis of welfare states even in the Global South and to embrace alternative conceptual frames – postcolonial/decolonial, intersectional, ecological – that bring to light the implicit assumptions that continue to inform much social policy research (Phillips & Williams, 2022; Williams, 2021). In other words, the aim is not to devalue or divert from the current research trajectories but to interleave the insights from different regional and historical perspectives to support cross-fertilisation across the empirical experiences drawn from the Global North and Global South.

In moving forward, a key challenge for the Journal is to work actively towards extending the empirical examples and theoretical perspectives to include experiences originating in other parts of the world. By including experiences from a broader range of regions, we aim to facilitate new conceptual frameworks which challenge or refine existing theories. Providing a richer ecosystem of empirical cases discussing experiences of social policy development and implementation is likely an essential part of any such process. The “mainstream” ideas of the social policy canon, originating mainly from Western European experiences, are the product of rigorous debate over decades – even centuries – that has honed the shape and content of these ideas. Their origins within the Western canon alone do not invalidate their insights or explanatory power. However, like all ideas, they must be tested against new empirical cases and alternative frameworks originating from other contexts, and through ongoing discussion and cross-fertilisation, we can synthesise new explanations and understandings. Ultimately, what matters is the rigour of the intellectual critique that shapes the social policy debate rather than the geographic origins of ideas. We hope that this Journal can play its part in enriching these critical debates in the field of international and comparative social policy analysis.

One avenue for taking this work forward comes in the shape of special issues. In particular, we seek to develop a series of special issues that explicitly push the boundaries of both “international” and “comparative” aspects of social policy beyond its origins in the experiences associated with the Global North. For example, this will include regional issues that capture the different historical, cultural and socio-political trajectories that have shaped social policy development in different parts of the globe. We also seek to explore special thematic issues that transcend social policy and development studies (e.g. informal welfare, inclusive welfare, colonialism) to facilitate cross-fertilisation of research insights and empirical cases. Finally, we aim to host special issues focusing on the transnational specific themes (e.g. transnational families, migration, eco-social policy, health and well-being) relevant to understanding social policy in the Global South and North. We sincerely hope this will stimulate scholarship that will explore a plurality of theoretical and methodological approaches and offer new and alternative ways of studying and understanding social policy from international and comparative perspectives – but that do so through critical conversation with existing approaches rather than in isolation of them.

Where do we go from here?

So far, this Editors’ Introduction has traced the contours of the published articles over the latest decade, highlighted a series of issues within international and comparative social policy scholarship, and

presented our vision to address them as incoming editors of the Journal. But how are we envisioning our role in this capacity more concretely? We want to conclude by providing readers with some of our short and medium-term priorities.

First and foremost, our efforts will be underpinned by a central focus on further enhancing the reputation of the Journal as a leading publication for researchers, academics, practitioners, and readers of international and comparative social policy. To this end, we will endeavour to create opportunities for a broader selection of international scholars to publish their work within a constructive, critical and peer-reviewed environment, enhancing the Journal's international reputation. We expressly encourage and intend to invite manuscripts promoting original research and innovative approaches for analysing international and comparative social policy, especially when these go beyond literature produced within the Global North or examine the boundaries between Social Policy and International Development Studies. We see our role as editors as linked directly with the ongoing work of maintaining, broadening and diversifying the authorship and readership of the Journal. Indeed, we are very keen to invite scholars from outside the field of Social Policy, who nevertheless engage with key concepts and questions of the field, to publish in this Journal.

Second, to maintain the ongoing work towards enhancing the reputation of the Journal, we are committed to taking the steps required for the eventual inclusion of the Journal in the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI). Whilst recognising that this process involves multiple steps over a substantial time, we are nevertheless setting our sights on this ambitious goal. Thanks to the careful stewardship of Zoë Irving and Kevin Farnsworth, the previous editors, the Journal is already in excellent standing. We are, therefore, confident that including the Journal in the SSCI presents an achievable goal.

Third, we will work closely with our Editorial Board to ensure that our focus remains on the state-of-the-art developments and the core issues in the field, which will feed into our efforts to broaden its appeal to a broader audience and authorship. As another step towards realising our aims and aspirations, we have created an open, ongoing call for special issues and themed sections on our website, along with guidance and proposal templates. We have also slightly edited the Journal's aims and scope better to align them with our vision and strategic direction and will provide further guidance for authors on authoring articles suitable for publication in the Journal.

Lastly, the Journal is now owned by the Social Policy Association (SPA), and as editors, we wish to foster close cooperation with the SPA through joint activities and collaborative endeavours, where possible or appropriate. For example, we will endeavour to organise symposia at the annual SPA conference on themes adjacent to the Journal and to support the international activities of the SPA where possible.

We are excited to start this journey with our colleagues, authors, reviewers, and readers. We look forward to their continued support as we begin to navigate the Journal through the ebbs and tides of these turbulent yet opportune times.

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