Social Policy & Society 3:1, 43–45 Printed in the United Kingdom
© 2003 Cambridge University Press DOI:10.1017/S1474746403001532

Themed Issue on Gender and Individualisation

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There are many debates about individualisation. In this section of the journal we are most concerned to probe the nature of the concept itself and how it is gendered, and the extent to which ideas about individualisation are underpinning the extensive restructuring of social provision that has been going on in welfare states during the last decade. As a set of processes, individualisation has major implications for family formation, labour supply and gender equality. There is some evidence that policymakers' assumptions about the progress of individualisation are outrunning changes in behaviour on the part of both men and women, with particularly serious implications for women. There is also some evidence that other policy developments may lag behind women's aspirations for greater autonomy or impede their efforts to achieve greater economic independence.

English-speaking readers of this journal are perhaps most likely to associate the concept of individualisation with Ulrich Beck and Elizabeth Beck-Gernsheim (Beck, 1986; Beck-Gernsheim, 2002), who have used it to mean the erosion of traditional ties and customs with more opportunity to exercise individual choice on the one hand, while on the other people are also more linked into the institutions of welfare states, labour markets, legal systems and bureaucracies. These complex processes have major implications for family formation, labour supply and gender equality. However, as Ilona Ostner's contribution to this section shows, the historiography of the concept of individualisation in the German literature is much longer and richer than this, and has actually meant very different things over time.

The concept also has an important position in the feminist literature. Feminist campaigns for women's financial independence in the 1970s argued strongly against the male breadwinner model family, in which it was assumed that men would take primary responsibility for earning and women for caring, and insisted on economic autonomy. In the recent policy debates, it is increasingly assumed that men and women are becoming and should become more autonomous. It is now a major policy goal at the level of the nation state and the EU to increase female employment. Policies across welfare states are now placing a greater emphasis on the obligation of all able-bodied adults to engage in paid work (via labour market activation policies and policies to 'make work pay') and on the duty of all adults to provide more for themselves, for example in respect of pensions.

But problems arise if policies are based on an 'ought' rather than an 'is'. Individualisation of this kind is argued by some to enhance individual choice and/or to promote social inclusion (via labour market participation and receipt of wages). However, individualisation at the level of the family and household is far from complete in practice. Women in a majority of Western European countries work part-time (albeit to very different degrees) and still do most of the unpaid work of care. Thus policies that assume rapid progress towards economic autonomy will in all likelihood promote greater gender

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746403001532 Published online by Cambridge University Press

inequality (Lewis, 2001, 2003). In addition, policies providing an individualised source of income in some circumstances (for example, payment for full-time caring without maintaining labour market links) may undermine ways of obtaining a more sustainable independent income in the longer term (Lister, 1992).

The articles in this section draw attention to the very different ways in which the idea of individualisation has been framed in both the academic literature (the German literature has been especially influential here) and in the policy arena. Individualisation has been linked to:

- processes of 'commodification' in modern welfare states, whereby all adults are increasingly expected to enter the labour market (and thus, in some countries, also to purchase care services hitherto provided in the family);
- processes of privatisation within modern welfare states (the most striking example being pension reform, which increasingly assumes that all adults will be able to become self-provisioning);
- progress towards making the individual the unit for assessment and/or payment of benefits and taxation of income.

Furthermore, it is important to distinguish between different *levels* of individualisation: particularly between state policies and what is happening at the level of the household, and between the social reality and political discourses.

Processes of individualisation and social policy change are very different in different European countries. Patterns are difficult to establish. Indeed, it may be that different 'policy logics' are emerging for children, for men and women of working age, and for pensioners, and that individualisation is being promoted in respect of some social programmes (particularly pensions) more than others, and in respect of some working age adults more than others (e.g. lone mothers more than married mothers). In addition, the application of individualising principles will look very different depending on the nature of the welfare system and existing policy logics. The meaning of individualisation will be different in systems based on means testing from those based on social insurance, and an agreement among policy makers to promote individualisation in the sense of economic autonomy may look ambiguous (or even contradictory) in practice (Bennett, 2002).

The articles provide a very useful introduction to the debates and policy changes in four European countries; in her discussion of the UK, Millar makes additional comparison with the Australian case. In the German case, reforms are being grafted on to an insurance-based system in what is commonly acknowledged to be a conservative society. In The Netherlands, the debate about the possibilities of 'life course redistribution' (whereby the individual would be invited to make choices about his or her lifetime's balance of employment, care work and leisure and would be held to account for those choices) is radical, but reform thus far has been both more moderate and inconsistent. In the UK, heavy dependence on means testing gives rise to particular kinds of ambiguities (and makes the comparison with Australia particularly interesting); while in Sweden, welfare benefits have long been premised on labour market participation and on active labour market policies, with the right of workers (exercised mainly by women) to 'decommodify' their labour to care for dependants.

Hobson's concluding paper on the Swedish case offers a series of models that help to distinguish the very different approaches that it is possible for governments to take to

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individualisation and the kind of policy solutions that would be necessary to promote gender equity alongside, or as an integral part of, individualisation. Such policy solutions would be likely to include progress towards gender equity in pay and in the labour market more generally; moves to emphasise the need for social provision and broad risk sharing as a backdrop to the achievement of genuine autonomy for women; and in particular the crucial importance of tackling the 'private' sphere of the gendered division of domestic labour.

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