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Introduction
Risk, Social Inclusion and the Life Course

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In social policy debates and research over recent years, 'risk', 'social inclusion' and 'the life course' have become influential topics. In this themed section we will revisit these concepts and analyse how they have influenced policy debates and research in Australia and elsewhere. The contributions were developed as part of a research collaboration that brings together expertise from social policy, gender studies, risk sociology, social work, youth studies and research on ageing and old age. This introduction outlines the concepts and dimensions we found helpful for analysing social policy practice and research and the key arguments of the contributions.

Keywords: Life course, risk, social exclusion/inclusion, generation, individualisation.

Introduction

In this themed section, we use Australia as an example to revisit contours of a social policy regime which have been developing in Europe, North America and Australia in recent decades. Our debate originates from the observation that 'risk', 'social inclusion' and the 'life course' have become influential on the macro level of general policy guidelines as well as on the micro level of concrete everyday practices. We consider these concepts as complementary in a regime of social policy practice, which indeed has different socio-cultural and institutional appearances but nevertheless combines a number of key characteristics. We will revisit these concepts to explore how they have shaped the rationale of social policy and research globally, and in a national context examine shortcomings and highlight directions for improvement.

Our debate developed in the wake of the 2008–09 financial crisis which was interpreted by many as a sign of the paradigm failure of the neoliberal orthodoxy in public policy. In Australia, which unlike many other countries did not formally enter recession at the time, many Labor politicians and researchers joined in the critique. After having opposed the neo-conservative government of John Howard for many years (1996–2007), many felt that the time was ripe to redefine the links between state, economy and social policy in a new social contract (Quiggin, 2009; Rudd, 2009; Smyth, 2010a). However, it remains unclear what such a new social settlement should encompass.

'We' are a group of academic and applied researchers who took on the challenge, and debated the weaknesses of and possible directions for social policy and research in Australia.[1] We combine academic and applied experience from the University of Melbourne, La Trobe University and the Brotherhood of St. Laurence, a prominent Australian NGO that fights social disadvantage through research, practical support and

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policy advice. We soon realised that some of our debates had been informed by the different imperatives that drove participants in our group. Initially, applied policy research and analysis were more influenced by the dynamics and issues of the immediate political debate, while academic critique was often informed by more fundamental conceptual issues that were not taken up in policy practice for a number of reasons (for example the kind of evidence acknowledged). The desire for conceptual critique sometimes competed with the desire for arguments which would fit with established positions and controversies in the political realm. Over time, with continuing conversation and some changes in the membership of the group, we began to articulate the contours of the debate and started to wonder whether we might be able to come up with a distinct 'Melbournian approach'.

Most contributions are written by author teams comprising applied and academic perspectives.[2] Not all topics are entirely new to the academic debate, such as the controversies about the generation and usage of knowledge in public policy (Boehm, Bowman and Zinn); however, how a political ideology and a specific form of knowledge combines in policy practice is still a pressing issue in conducting research and providing knowledge for social policy.

Our debates were informed by the different and competing understandings of risk, the way the social inclusion agenda has shaped research and social policy practice, and how a life course sensitised approach could contribute to highlighting and overcoming shortcomings in social policy and research. When we formulated our critique towards research and practice we regularly referred at least to one of the following four dimensions: the epistemological assumptions, the explicit and implicit normativity, the model of the subject, and the understanding of and responses to (social) complexity.

In the following, I will introduce how the three concepts, 'risk', 'social inclusion' and the 'life course' are related to social policy and will continue with some particular aspects of the Australian case. I then show how the different articles contribute to and critique current debates in social policy and research before I conclude.

Risk, social inclusion and the life course

'Risk' entered debates in three different ways: as a problem ('new social risks', Taylor-Gooby, 2004), as a solution ('regulation by risk', Hutter, 2003) and as an ideology of individual risk-taking ('entrepreneurial self', Giddens, 1998). These notions have been accompanied by a shift of responsibility for managing social risk from the state to the individual, the community, charities and private enterprises (Kemshall, 2002; Hacker, 2006; Marston *et al*., 2010), the new public management movement to control and regulate risks (Hutter, 2003; Moran, 2007), and increasing public scrutiny of politics and public services (Giddens, 1998). Risk has also become central for the understanding of key social policy domains such as poverty, social inequality and youth, which were transformed into risks of (deep) social exclusion (Horn *et al*., 2011) or delayed or failed transitions into and out of work (Wyn and Woodman, 2006).

Notions of 'risk', 'social inclusion' and the 'life course' became prominent in social policy and sociology at a time when established certainties of institutional arrangements and socio-cultural expectations came under pressure. With the end of the 'Golden Age' of welfare capitalism, which had been characterised by stable life-long employment for many, relatively secure and high wages, clear gender-specific divisions of labour, and Keynesian demand-side policies, life in Europe, North America and Australia has

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changed significantly (Taylor-Gooby, 2004; Armingeon and Bonoli, 2006; Quiggin, 2010). Continuous relatively high unemployment rates, women entering into the labour market and pressing for equal rights, ageing populations and economic globalisation among other developments challenged old welfare states and their risk management tools at a time when life became more unpredictable, and insecurity became an experience for more people from different social milieus.

As a result, many governments saw themselves challenged by rising demands and restricted resources while their capacity to reconcile the two decreased (Taylor-Gooby, 2004: 6). A fundamental shift in governing societies seemed required. With the weakening faith in Keynesianism, governments increasingly shifted towards Monetarianism. In a climate where the major challenge for governing states was seen in the successful management of financial risks, social policy became increasingly informed by austerity, outsourcing and marketisation of services. This development was particularly emphasised in states with a neoliberal tradition and an overall priority for a small state such as Australia. The new orthodoxy was characterised by the belief that the efficient functioning of markets, rather than the expansion of benefits and services, would serve best the objectives of welfare states (Taylor-Gooby, 2004: 12–13).

As part of this shift, the view became influential that private sector instruments to ensure efficient and effective use of resources and management of risk would be the appropriate remedy for the public sector (for a balanced account see Hood and Rothstein, 2000). The new public management movement symbolised this radical shift in the management of public administration with a strong focus on formalised quality and risk management instruments to assure cost-efficiency and quality (Hood, 1991, 2001). Such formalised regulation has become particularly important when services have been outsourced and marketised altogether to ensure compliance and service quality (Hutter, 2003).

It is important to note that it was not only the financial pressure that pushed the reform of public services and the introduction of formalised quality and risk management measures. High profile scandals supported the view that a better and independent control of professions is needed,[3] based on formalised measures for good practice and risk management rather than the subjective views and tacit knowledge of professionals.

It was this political climate which supported the growing emphasis on evidence-based social policy and formalised service delivery underpinned by a new valuation of methodological positivism and standardised mass data. But it was also an alerted public which pushed for better control, professional accountability and consumer rights. The deinstitutionalisation of people with disabilities back into the community is one example where the desire for more freedom and autonomy for patients merged with government's interest to restrict spending. As a result, adult social work had to manage new complex tensions between the needs of the people with disabilities, the risks for the service and the possible harm for the community (Warner, 2006; Green *et al.*, 2010).

Social groups such as women, patients, people with disabilities, homosexuals and others who pressed for more rights and autonomy support an enlightenment model of citizenship. The political response to the quest for more self-determined living was answered by the 'entrepreneurial self' (Giddens, 1998) or, even more narrowly, the rational market subject that tries to improve itself and its opportunities by investing in education to increase market values and career opportunities (for a critique see Taylor-Gooby, 2009).

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This was accompanied by a significant shift in the understanding of citizenship from one based on rights to one based on mutual obligations (for example, see Hamilton, 2012).

Altogether, the dominant response to the changes after the Golden Age of welfare capitalism combined an emphasis on financial risk management, formalised service delivery and a narrowed model of citizenship into a *great risk shift* in Australia and elsewhere (Quiggin, 2010; Hacker, 2006). It is linked to other developments such as the desire for more self-determined ways of living, more public participation and transparency in political decision making, which are somehow integrated and shaped in a way that they fit the new orthodoxy.

However, two developments made risk management after the Golden Age of welfare capitalism more difficult. The old welfare state was based on the reality of the life cycle (Rowntree, 1902) and a model of a 'normal' life course defined by clearly defined status passages into and out of work (Kohli, 1986) or into and out of caring responsibilities and complementary work (Levy *et al*., 2002). It was based on a 'normal' work life for the breadwinner and gender-specific division of labour. As a result, welfare states dealt mainly with a relatively small number of clearly defined risks. In contrast, today the boundaries and characteristics of life phases such as between youth and adulthood and work and retirement have become blurred. The relatively clearly structured life courses of the baby boomers and their recipes for success no longer fit the experiences of current generations (Andres and Wyn, 2010). For many, work itself has become increasingly uncertain where low quality part time and casual work does not provide enough income, and little control over working hours makes it difficult to combine work and family responsibilities.

Not only has the life course become more complex and less predictable but also the risk of poverty is no longer as clearly bound to social class or successfully dealt with through powerful unions, which had been previously able to negotiate high wages and work protection. People of many different social milieus experience, during the course of their life, shorter or longer periods of poverty, while for a relatively small group this is a continuous and life-long experience.[4] With unions losing power, poverty has become an increasingly individualised experience which has many faces and might even increase (Beck, 1992). With the introduction of the social exclusion/inclusion semantic, the multidimensionality of 'disadvantage' beyond poverty came to be acknowledged, at least in academia if not policy practice (Levitas *et al*., 2007; Scutella *et al*., 2009). Having a low income for a specific period of time is only one among many indicators, but when combined with others might lead to deep and long-term social exclusion (Horn *et al*., 2011). However, the social inclusion/exclusion semantic is contested and has been criticised, for example, for its tendency to obscure social inequalities (Levitas, 1996; Silver, 2010).

Researchers have developed a number of multidimensional social exclusion measures to show how Australia succeeds (Horn *et al*., 2011), while in policy practice targeting a small number of at-risk graps dominates. The overall rationale is framed by the desire to provide protection against financial risks by austerity measures and the morally enforced need of every Australian, if capable, to contribute to the productivity of the country (Australian Government, 2010).

While academia tends to acknowledge the growing complexity and diversity of life and poverty, policy practice is informed by models of decontextualised rational action and labour market integration that mainly utilise 'objective' mass data. This is an 'efficient' way of governing complex societies, leaving the majority to managing their life individually,

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while the ones who drop out of the dominant model of existence are targeted by more restrictive measures of encouraged and enforced labour market inclusion.

There is little basis to support an Australian exceptionalism in social policy. Australia's approach to social risk management broadly follows paths similar to other industrialised countries (Quiggins, 2010: 7), although there are some particularities which give the Australian experience a specific twist and make it an interesting case in comparison with the US and the UK.

The Australian case

The Australian version of a market liberal approach to welfare is an interesting case for a number of reasons. Similarly to the UK with the Margaret Thatcher government (1979–90) and the US with Ronald Regan (1981–89), Australia went through an intensive period of deregulation during the conservative government led by John Howard (1996–2007). The common change in these countries towards market liberalism was characterised by privatisation and marketisation. This has not been fundamentally reversed by the New Labo(u)r governments of Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard in Australia or Tony Blair and Gordon Brown in the UK, where recently a Conservative–Liberal coalition has engaged in unprecedented cuts in welfare spending (Taylor-Gooby and Stoker, 2011; Levitas, 2012).

In terms of social spending, Australia spends less than the UK and since 1980s has been closer to the USA. When social spending in the USA increased during the 2000s from a relatively low level similar to that of Australia to about 19.5 per cent of GDP in 2012, Australia's spending remained at 16.1 per cent of GDP, while the UK's social spending remained at about 22.9 per cent of GDP (OECD, 2012). However, the analysis by Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) found that Australia performs much better on their index of health and social problems than the US or the UK, despite relatively high income inequalities.

As part of the British Commonwealth, Australia has always been influenced by British politics and recently followed the social exclusion/inclusion approach of New Labour. However, Australia has also become a forerunner, for example, in the privatisation of employment services in 1989 (Saunders, 2008; Grover, 2009; Wright *et al.*, 2011).

Australia differs remarkably from traditions of Bismarck- or Beveridge-style social welfare states in Europe. From early days, there has been a relatively strong focus on 'welfare by work', with, for example, a minimum wage established in 1907. This focus inspired Castles (1989) to term the Australian approach a 'wage earners' welfare state'. In this tradition, family and children tend to be seen as private where the support of the breadwinner for a decent income would secure the basis for the breadwinner and his family, manifesting at the same time fundamental gender inequalities in income and social security for women (Australian Government, 2012).

From Federation and the Social Investment State (1870s–1930s) through to a Keynesian Mixed Economy (1970s–1983) and the Accord Years of corporatist policies (1983–1997) until neo-conservative de-regulative policies (1996–2007) and the recent Labor government, there have been various attempts to introduce strong social welfare policies, the most comprehensive during the Whitlam Labor government (1972–75), alternating with support for free market policies. Altogether, however, Australia has across its history, tried to overcome market failures in the quest for a more productive and

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sustainable economy, rather than restricting market forces (Smyth, 2010b, 102ff., 111, 133–4). So the 'Australian settlement' focussed on investment in individuals rather than developing broader 'Bismarck'-style social security systems and comprehensive support for the family.

In Australia, as in Europe in the 1970s and 1980s, the feminist movement put pressure on governments to replace policies that were based on assumptions of gender differences (and dependence on males) with gender equitable policies. Australia also followed the global trend to combine infrastructure and distributive policies with de-regulative policies to increase competitiveness and free (labour) markets. As a result of deregulation of the labour market and the weakening of employees' rights in recent decades, Australia has become an international leader in low quality part-time (mainly casualised) work, and in the fanning out of income inequalities compared with other OECD countries (Atkinson, 2007). The crucial question is how such developments as increased social inequalities, uncertainties and poverty can be mitigated in a liberal market and work-based tradition. Against this backdrop various author have developed proposals towards social inclusion and a 'social investment state' (Howe, 2007; Smyth, 2010a) or a 'Good Society' (Whelan *et al*., 2012) have been brought forward. It remains unclear, though, whether any attempts will be able to fundamentally reduce social inequalities and poverty in Australia considering the underlying institutional and socio-cultural heritage, with, for example, an unquestioned priority for a small state, the marketisation and privatisation of public services and a narrow understanding of citizenship bound to integration in the labour market.

Dimensions of critique

When we revisited 'risk', 'social inclusion' and 'the life course' in different domains, such as youth transitions, ageing populations, community care, work life and knowledge generation, our critique of current research and social policy practice developed along one or more of the following dimensions that I will use in the following to outline the key arguments of the contributions: underlying epistemological assumptions, the implicit or explicit normativity, relative de-contextualisation of the model of the subject, and the understanding of and responses to complexity.

Bowman, Bodsworth and Zinn argue that in the Australian tradition of the 'wage earners' welfare state' (Castles, 1989), a relatively unquestioned norm of social inclusion through work prevails, although the conditions have changed from the breadwinner/caretaker model, where the state guaranteed a stable income for the breadwinner to be able to care for the dependent family members, to the application of a gender neutral 'adult worker model' (Lewis, 2001). It is implicit in Australian neo-familialism (Daly, 2010) that women mainly achieve family–work 'balance' by engaging in relatively low qualified and unprotected part-time and casual work, which is socio-culturally framed as individual choice. This normative discourse is so dominant that even mothers who are affected by tightened conditionality for state support use the phrases 'lifestyle' and 'choice' when describing conditions which trap them in 'impossible' decision making situations where they lose out on both career prospects and meeting care responsibilities.

This contribution also highlights the underlying normative assumptions of the welfare-to-work policy measures which frame mothers who are not engaged in paid work as

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lacking motivation and need of encouragement. Increased conditionality even implies moral degeneration, which needs to be overturned by enforced compliance to a dominant model of proper life. This normative framing obscures well-known alternative reasons why women do not work, for example the low quality of work or caring responsibilities for others.

This highlights the 'linked lives' reality, which is often neglected in the welfare-to-work programmes that focus on individualised and autonomous market subjects. The gender neutral adult-worker model does not only neglect gender differences as such, but also the complexity of commitments that restrict women's autonomy and structure their decision making. This can lead to systematic traps where all decisions produce long- term undesirable effects, whether a neglect of the caring role or low pensions.

Woodman and Wyn suggest in their article on youth studies that the long dominant 'transitions approach' into adulthood has been underpinned by a naturalised model of the life course which merges a model of a *normal life course* and states of *personality development* into expectations of the right timing and managing of transitions and the risks involved. They suggest that this model of relatively clearly separated life phases and a transition from a state of dependency to independence might have worked for past generations, such as the baby boomers, but seems no longer adequate to understand the experiences, conditions and the risks faced by recent generations. Against the background of such a model based on the experiences of a specific generation, the baby boomers, transitions of the more recent generations appear as failed or delayed. Woodman and Wyn suggest preventing such naturalisations of the risks of the transition into adulthood by acknowledging the extent to which such experiences are socially constructed and that observable youth transitions should be judged against the particular responses a new generation develops when dealing with the changing institutional and cultural contexts. This critique is also directed against all tendencies to use a generalised model of the subject to determine individual motivations and judge transition outcomes. In order to avoid a homogenisation of generation experiences they stress that there are significant differences between experiences of different social groups within a generation ('generation fractions').

Biggs and Kimberly show how the dominance of an economics lens in policy debates, with a focus on the financial risks for a nation, also affects the policy response to population ageing. They argue that the perception of senior Australians has changed from the negative view of being a burden and risk to a positive view of being a valuable economic resource that can be used to increase Australia's productivity and hence overcome the economic challenges of population ageing. Although contributing to a more positive view of ageing, to the extent that it is primarily seen in terms of employability, the risks and opportunities other than financial are neglected (for example, generation conflicts, discrimination at the work place) and alternative approaches to ageing are devalued.

The debates on 'active ageing' and the 'economic potential of senior Australians' (Australian Government, 2011) emphasise the ability of elderly Australians to contribute to the nation's productivity. The framing of the debates about population ageing with the assumption that increasingly healthier and longer living adults should contribute to the productivity of Australia as does everyone else, tends to ignore the nature of ageing and how the experience of ageing might change attitudes, values and abilities of older people.

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With the application of a general or universal model of the subject in social policy, homogeneity between age groups is implied. As a result, Biggs and Kimberly suggest that age discrimination today might result from ignoring age-related differences, rather than over-emphasising the limitations that go along with ageing.

Sawyer and Green argue that the trend to move people with disabilities out of institutions into the community to save money and to allow more self-determined lifestyles has significantly transformed the role of care. There is a new need to deal with and balance complex risk situations in everyday life with considerations of quality of life and well-being. In this context, the new public management movement contributed to the introduction of increasingly formalised quality and risk management strategies in public services. These strategies shape the agency of service users as well as professionals and are meant to secure efficiency and service quality as well as protecting the organisation against prosecution. Research has shown that in practice the balance of risk management and quality of life is too complex to be fully formally regulated and has to be informed by the primary task and values of an organisation. Thus, it always requires subjective professional experience to make judgements in every single case (Kemshall, 2002). As Sawyer and Green have shown, for high-risk community care in Australia, the shift from need to risk reduction and prevention has been accompanied by the increasing requirement to negotiate risk-taking with the service uses.

Compared with the privatisation of labour services in Australia (Saunders, 2008), or mental health care (Warner, 2006), this example shows that the degree of formalisation and the ability to resist this depends on the definition of the potential risk as a danger mainly for the patient, to the community or the service itself.

Boehm, Bowman and Zinn in their article argue that the governing of increasingly complex societies (Luhmann, 1995) depends on the generation of objective data (Hacking, 1990) by survey research. These data are indispensable in their ability to reduce social complexity in a systematic way, using averages, probabilities and measurable aspects of social life to determine, predict and influence social developments. However, this advantage might be at the same time its weakness. By examining a number of selected questions from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey, Boehm *et al*. show how questions are framed within a particular political and socio-cultural understanding, and respondents interpret them through their long-standing experience with state representatives. As such, these surveys tend to reinforce existing knowledge. Since the format does not encourage or allow alternative views of social reality to develop and to be heard, standardised forms of knowledge generation might actively reinforce existing social power structures.

Altogether the contributions formulate critique on a number of dimensions. Some contributions formulate an epistemological critique. For example, Woodman and Wyn argue from a constructivist perspective that youth studies lack acknowledgement of the social construction of life course and transition experiences, while Biggs and Kimberley emphasise, from a critical-realist perspective, a lack of recognition of the nature of ageing. The contributions also show how explicit normativity (for example, priority for social inclusion into work, mutual obligation discourse) and implicit normativity (for example, privatisation of family decisions and disadvantage) combine in social policy practice to support narrow approaches to social reality which can lead to perverse effects (Bowman, Bodsworth and Zinn). This issue is linked to the underlying concept of the subject that tends to narrow the lived reality in a way that supports inefficient service provision.

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Instead, we propose a life course sensitised approach that acknowledges competing life domains as well as the time dimension that informs subjectivity. Other key factors are, for example, the complexity of everyday life, the process of ageing and the historical embeddedness of individuals. Finally, we suggest that governing societies requires an efficient transformation of an in-principle ungovernable contingency into manageable complexity. This is the value of standardised knowledge generation. As the contributions show, efficient social policy and service delivery also require a complementary qualitative approach, which allows the negotiation and co-production of knowledge, as much as discretionary space in professional practice, to bring back in complexity.

Conclusion

Risk has entered social policy as concerns about *new risks*, a technology to govern societies and a normative paradigm of individual *risk-taking* to deal with uncertain futures of increasingly complex societies. Risk's appearance as objective is, however, fallacious. The notion of risk cannot be detached from political decisions about social values and preferences. This is the case when ageing populations are mainly approached through the lens of financial risks to the state (Biggs and Kimberley), or when social inclusion policies shift risks to the welfare recipients or enforce individual risk-taking (Bowman, Bodworth and Zinn), or when the risks of managing the transition towards adulthood are measured against the experience and conditions of past generations (Woodman and Wyn).

Decision-making on the macro level of social policy, as well as on the micro level of professional practice, has to deal with complexity and uncertainty. The effects of the increasing application of risk technologies (statistics, probability theory, check-lists) are ambivalent. They are helpful in managing compliance and some aspects of service quality. They de-personalise and objectivise decisions that help to protect welfare providers and professionals against public scrutiny and litigation. Since these technologies tend to de-contextualise the situations of service users, to appropriately manage the messiness of everyday life additionally requires tacit knowledge, trust and experience-based professional judgements. Thus, social policy needs both evidence for quality and efficiency to justify social policy and the flexibility to meet the complexity of specific needs (Sawyer and Green). Similarly, policy decisions on the macro level have to balance the effective reduction of complexity by demographic or survey data with the openness for the unobserved, the new and unexpected (Boehm, Bowman and Zinn).

The individualised model of the risk-taker as a basis for social policy is ambivalent. Freedom to shape one's life regarding individual values and interests is highly valued in Western societies, while specific groups and welfare recipients are increasingly regulated and controlled, such as single parents or indigenous Australians. In Australia, the emphasis on labour market deregulation, the weakening of employees' protection and an overall individualised approach to social policy, exposes already disempowered social groups to severe risks and disadvantage. Thus, the social exclusion/inclusion agenda building on 'mutual obligation' rhetoric (Hamilton, 2012) tends to neglect and exacerbate social inequalities rather than to provide resources for development, growth and resilience. The success of such approaches fundamentally depends on the investments societies make, not just in individuals but in the infrastructure that they provide to support women and men managing life within and beyond the labour market (Giddens, 1998).

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When we started our debates about social policy in Australia after the financial crisis, we thought about the possibility of developing a distinctive approach to social policy. Considering the inappropriateness of a one-size-fits-all approach for social policy, and the need to adapt to institutional and cultural contexts, as well as domain-specific conditions, the aim of this themed section is much more moderate. With 'risk', 'social inclusion' and the 'life course', we scrutinise three key concepts of current and emerging social policy regimes with the help of four central dimensions, which are crystallised from our contributions in the critique of current social policy debates in Australia. We consider these dimensions crucial for examining the negotiation of social problems and policy responses.

On the epistemological level, implicit models of the life course are criticised for not acknowledging the social construction of youth and adulthood as well as for ignoring the nature of ageing. Normative assumptions are identified in the dominance of economic value orientations focussing on productivity, finances and work when approaching social inclusion, rather than the social values of belonging, friendship, love and mutual support. On the level of governance and regulation, the strong reliance on formalised procedures and positive knowledge when approaching social problems, rather than a sensible balance of formalised procedures and professional expertise are identified. Professional practice is characterised by the need to balance ambivalences on both sides: service delivery and service users. Contradicting needs for openness and controllability of quality and compliance of services compete with the need for protection, discretion and autonomy by the service users. Finally, a complex and dynamic model of the subject is required to understand processes of relative autonomy. Individuals are embedded in networks of relationships which include mutual support and commitment and are structured by competing norms, emotions and trust, rather than narrow considerations to maximise (subjective) utility.

It remains open to debate whether the dimensions of our critique regarding key concepts of the current social policy regime could contribute to the development of a distinct 'Melbournian approach' to social policy research and practice.

Notes

1 The initiative was supported by a seed grant of the University of Melbourne in 2010–11. Of the number of other people who had been involved in the debates I would particularly like to thank Paul Smyth for the encouragement to set up the group. Further information on the initiative can be found at http://www.ssps.unimelb.edu.au/research/projects/rsilc.

2 It is important to note that applied researchers may also hold an academic position and vice versa so the divide is shifting.

3 Compare critical reflections on such a view: Warner (2006), Mendes (2001).

4 An exception are indigenous Australians which are much more likely to be poor or socially excluded and where the generational reproduction of social disadvantage is much more likely than among other Australians.

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