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Decentring Social Policy? Devolution and the Discipline of Social Policy: A Commentary

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Abstract

Constitutional change offers the opportunity for a major departure in the nature and direction of policy, practices and governance in social policy. This article explores some of the impacts devolution has for the discipline of social policy, suggesting that devolution *matters* for social policy as a field of research and study, and for the analysis and understanding of developments in UK social policy. It argues that devolution has a number of implications in terms of comparative and transnational social policy, new sites of analysis, the language of social policy, the production of knowledge and the development of new policy communities within the UK. It also signals new perspectives based on evolving welfare subjectivities and around questions of territorial justice. Drawing on discussions about the nature of social policy in the 1970s in particular, suggestions are made as to how new and emerging perspectives within and across the nations of the UK serve to 'decentre' the social policy tradition. In essence, this article seeks to open up a debate for 'theorising' the discipline of social policy through a focus on devolution.

Introduction

It is something of a convention in social policy texts to open with rumination on the discipline of social policy, its aims, parameters and future. Titmuss, in his 1974 volume, refers to 'this tiresome business of defining social policy' and a measure of the interest about such discussions may come from Alcock *et al.* (1998: 12) who, perhaps provocatively, say in their footnotes to their opening chapter on the discipline: 'there are no text books dealing with the history and development of the discipline of social policy, it is perhaps too boring a topic for a whole book'! The debate nevertheless continues to engage us. A special edition of the Social Policy Association's *Policy World* in 2004 dedicated itself to the question 'Where next for social policy?' and invited contributions from several prominent commentators (SPA, 2004). Each had some suggestions as to

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what could bolster the discipline and re-establish its identity. Paul Spicker argued for a reintroduction of the term 'social administration' to demonstrate a central concern with 'the structure and operation of services, the process of service delivery and the effect these services have on the people who receive them' (2004: 8). In sharp contrast, Adrian Sinfield, revisiting Tawney and Titmuss, suggested a focus on 'a political economy of welfare, which connects to broader structural changes and their consequences for the welfare of people – in a word, upstream!' (2004: 10) and Stuart Lowe argued for more multidisciplinarity and in particular advanced the case for putting 'political science back into the heart of social policy' (2004: 13). Reflecting these and other different arguments about where now for social policy, it is generally agreed that social policy is highly contested, and the discipline is by its nature malleable, permeable and dynamic. For many, it is this contestation that imbues academic vitality into the subject area. This article offers a contribution to that debate 'Where next for social policy?', suggesting that devolution and constitutional change in the UK have profound implications for the nature and direction of the discipline of social policy.

Devolution is not an even process. There are distinct differences in the nature of settlements for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, each having greater or lesser powers in relation to reserved matters. Neither is it complete, but moreover subject to ongoing development and change. Devolution, as has often been commented, is not and was not a single event in 1999, but an unfolding process. The Welsh Assembly, for example, initially had only secondary legislative powers but since 2006 is able to make qualified primary legislation. There are calls in Wales for more powers along the lines of the Scottish Parliament, while in Scotland there have been demands, particularly since the May 2007 Scottish elections, for 'more' devolution. Where matters are reserved, the Scottish Parliament and the Northern Ireland Assembly are empowered to hold primary legislative powers and executive responsibility for such matters where primary responsibility remains at the centre. Despite this dynamic, the core policy areas that are devolved tend to be focused on key areas of social policy (see Keating, 2002: 16–19 for a complete listing of devolved and reserved powers).

The extent to which social policy is being transformed by specific constellations of policy divergence and convergence across the UK is not, however, as significant as the changing and shifting social/political discursive terrain that devolution implies (cf. *Critical Social Policy*, August 2006). In both Wales and Scotland there have been signs that administrations have been reluctant to commit *fully* to New Labour's programme of public services reform, at least to the degree this is being pursued in England. The election of a Scottish National Party (SNP)-led Scottish Government following the Scottish Parliament elections in May 2007 and the establishment of a coalition government (Labour/Plaid Cymru) in Wales promise to generate additional tensions between the devolved administrations and Westminster. Further, devolution has disrupted

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some 'traditional' senses of 'Britishness', prompting several prominent New Labour politicians (including Prime Minister Gordon Brown) to repeated efforts to celebrate Britishness as a UK-wide source of identity.

Another issue to be flagged here concerns relationships between the devolved administrations and the European Union. The EU has had direct involvement in Scotland and Wales for at least two decades through, for example, Structural Funds and other regional policy programmes, highlighting the institutional recognition by supranational agencies of multi-national distinctiveness within the UK. The SNP has long argued that Scotland should become an independent member state of the EU, engaging directly with other member states. In June 2007, new Scottish First Minister and SNP leader Alex Salmond visited Belfast and Dublin, promising to pursue greater links with both governments, and has also spoken of the new Scottish Government's ambition that Scotland would enjoy a 'relationship of equals' with other countries, in the process effectively bypassing Westminster (MacDonell, 2007).

The key argument that we are advancing here is that the potential of devolution for social policy cannot be fully grasped through a focus on those policies which have been devolved alone, but only though an understanding of the ways in which this is intertwined with and contributes to new forms of territorial politics, inequalities and entitlements, and with issues of social citizenship and social justice on a UK-wide (that is, transnational) level. In other words, devolution helps to create what we might term a new social topography, contributing to the emergence of a new discursive terrain. The focus of this article is, therefore, not the detail of policy differentiation but the detail of differentiation in the social relations of social policy that prompt a reframing within the discipline.

From social administration to social policy

In different ways, a number of social policy theorists have tracked the transition of the discipline from Fabian social administration to social policy (see, for instance, Mishra, 1977; Pinker, 1979; Spicker, 1995; Fitzpatrick, 2001). The discipline has clearly come a long way since Mishra's trenchant critique of the social administration tradition in his 1977 essay. Alongside writers such as Pinker, Mishra criticised the discipline's atheoretical orientation and the fact that, in Pinker's words, it was 'stubbornly resistant to comparative treatment' (Pinker, 1979: 48). This introspection, Mishra suggests, produces an ethnocentric bias with distortions of perspective caused by the national focus (*sic British* focus) which he argues 'have a deleterious effect on consciousness about welfare' (1977: 9). Mishra's critique (1977: 25) goes on to deride the 'technicist handmaidenly role' of the empiricist tradition and signals some caution about the search for a single unifying purpose or '*central puzzle*' to give a focus for its multidisciplinary

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orientation. Rather, he suggests, what is needed is 'a discipline which transcends the descriptive, national study of social problems and services but avoids the trap of an arid technicist policy science' (1977: 24).

More recently, Lewis, in her essay 'Expanding the social policy imaginary', calls for a 'rethinking' of the discipline, which she suggests 'implies a challenge to existing ways of thinking. The idea of rethinking provides us with a convenient way of registering a set of arguments, conflicts and challenges around the study of social policy' (Lewis, 2000: 20). While it may have become almost passé to detail the limits and constraints of Fabian social policy, Lewis finds much to recommend it, focusing on the principles and value commitments established by Titmuss, but she identifies a number of critical trajectories which have broadened the field. Lewis' argument focuses on the question of the contested boundaries of social policy, which to a certain extent picks up Mishra's line of thinking. Both seek to open up the intellectual horizons of social policy in the light of welfare pluralism, theoretical pluralism, multi-disciplinarity and, in Mishra's words, 'wider explorations' of the nature of social justice/injustice and 'the locus of power', which reverberates with Lewis observations about the democratisation of welfare practices. Both, however, take the nation-state as a given and hold back from acknowledging the contestation within the UK multi-national state.

Successive efforts in the 1970s and 1980s to draw the academic community's attention to the arena of intra-UK comparison largely failed to find a foothold, although there were several attempts to push this through: for example, a series of SSRC- and SPA-sponsored seminars which raised the issue of intra-UK and Ireland comparative study and analysis. The rise of (contrasting nationalisms) in Northern Ireland and Scotland also partly served to increase awareness of the need for intra-UK and Ireland research, as reflected in studies typified by *Social Policy in Northern Ireland* (Ditch, 1988); *Social Services in Scotland* (English, 1988) and *Health and Welfare States of Britain* (Williamson and Room, 1983). While it is clear that several writers have written prolifically on social policy within the context of particular constituent countries of the UK (for instance, in the context of Northern Ireland, Eithne McLaughlin), the comparative potential of this terrain has not been fully grasped by 'mainstream' social policy. There are, as we suggest below, a number of reasons for this myopia, not least the power relations between the constituent parts of the UK and the very UK centrist notion of the state that has dominated social policy discourse. The shift in focus devolution demands represents what can potentially amount to a paradigmatic turn that brings with it new vantage points and new perspectives. As Offer explains, 'with any paradigm certain questions are central, not others; shift the paradigm and new (or old) concerns come into view' (2006: 297). We argue that devolution holds the potential to raise such new points of emphasis.

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The comparative and transnational 'twist'

Rodríquez-Rose and Gill note that 'globalisation has been accompanied by an equally global tendency towards the devolution of authority and resources from nation-states to regions and localities' (2003: 333). This global trend is evident across different national and regional contexts, for instance including across Europe, in Mexico and Brazil, China and India. Devolution is developing at the very moment when there is a growing recognition of the important insights that a 'transnational social policy' focus can bring to social policy analysis, in particular illuminating the ways in which social relations, processes and activities are cutting across different nations and nation-states (Yeates, 2001). As Clarke has noted, comparative social policy analysis has traditionally tended to understand welfare and welfare states as national phenomena (Clarke, 2005: 407). Increasingly, however, globalisation, regionalisation and Europeanisation are generating new types of multi-level governance – and diverse forms of regionalism, decentralisation, federalism and devolution – disrupting the assumptions of a close 'fit' between welfare and nation.

It would be mistaken, however, to suggest that 'regionalism' and decentralisation are entirely new phenomena. While the distinctiveness of key areas of social policy and criminal justice prior to devolution in Scotland and in Northern Ireland has long been recognised in the social policy literature, the implications of regionalism and in particular 'federalist' forms of government for the organisation and delivery of welfare have enjoyed more prominence in the political sciences (cf. Greer, 2006; McEwan and Moreno, 2005; Obinger *et al.*, 2005; Wincott, 2006). A recurring theme in the federalist literature relates to the possible impacts that federalism might have on social spending and on social welfare. One of the main claims that has been advanced is that federalism (and by implication decentralisation and devolution) undermines welfare states (Lowi, 1998; Swank, 2002). In part such arguments suggest that decentralising and devolving tendencies can undermine social citizenship and a shared national sense of social justice and belonging. In the context of devolution in the UK, such claims were also advanced before devolution in 1999 and have re-emerged thereafter in arguments that it has increased intra- and inter-regional inequalities across the UK (Byrne, 2002). Against this, other commentators have questioned the degree to which such developments will undermine welfare and, in particular for our purposes, the UK welfare state (see Pierson, 1994; Wincott, 2006), with arguments advanced that the 'left-leaning' political traditions and cultures in Scotland and Wales would offer some opposition to New Labour welfare modernisation and retrenchment agendas (see Jeffrey, 2005; Paterson *et al.*, 2001).

The concerns of federalism studies and political sciences with regionalism, multi-tiered governance and with territorial inequalities and regional differences in welfare provision meet many of the long-held interests of social policy – for

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instance, with place, space and territory and with welfare retrenchment among other issues – and in this way help to open up new ways of thinking about social policy in the context of the devolved UK. However, while it is important to recognise the 'pluralism of federalism' (Obinger *et al.*, 2005: 14), that there are many varieties of federalist systems, some forms of which bear close resemblance to the devolution settlement enacted in the UK in 1998, federalism and devolution are distinctive processes. Federalism generally involves a degree of constitutional decentralisation, whereas in the UK devolution settlement Westminster retains sole power over the constitution; that is, it remains sovereign and can, at least in principle, rescind devolution, a process that is not possible under federalism. The highly asymmetrical form of UK devolution means that important areas of legislation remain 'reserved' to the UK Parliament in Westminster, along with highly centralised fiscal control. While over the past few centuries successive British governments have been prolific in exporting federalism across the Empire (to Canada, Malaysia and Australia, for instance), federalism has rarely been on the political agenda within the UK.

There is another important issue that emerges from this discussion relating to the peculiarity of devolution in the UK, which reminds us that devolution and federalism are distinctive: devolution is taking place in the context not of a unitary nation-state but in a multi-national or pluri-national state. Viewed from Scotland and Wales, devolution is inextricably linked with the expression of national sentiments and with some sense of national self-determination. In this significant respect, devolution is neither regionalism nor federalism. In the Scottish context, in particular, the Scottish Government sitting in Edinburgh is seen (though not by New Labour in London!) as *the* national government *of* and *for* Scotland. As we will see below, governments in both Wales and Scotland have been actively 'badging' policies as 'Welsh' and 'Scottish' as part of a process of 'nation-building' (see McEwan, 2006; Mooney and Williams, 2006).

However, the federalist literature, as might be expected, while helping us to understand some of the distinctiveness of devolution and the institutional dimensions of this process, tends to focus largely on polity. By contrast, there is some neglect of the ideologies and discourses upon which social policies are constructed, as well as of what we would term the *social divisions and relations of welfare*, the inclusions, exclusions, inequalities and oppressions that permeate welfare policy and practice. Social policy analysis has much to contribute to an understanding of these issues in the devolutionary context.

As with federalism, there are different forms of devolution. The depth and breadth of these devolutionary trends have important implications for the analysis and understanding of social policy in the devolved UK *as well as* for social policy developments at a transnational level. This opens up the potential for more rich and fruitful work on the ways in which transnational flows and connections

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are playing out within England as well the devolved countries of the UK, for instance in relation to migration, as well as across them. Through this territoriality is recast, and place and space come to take on new meanings. Devolution in the UK, therefore, can both bring a renewed vigour and a new audience to the comparative analysis of social policy in particular and to the rethinking of social policy in general. Given their remit, the new political and governance institutions of devolution, the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly and Northern Ireland Assembly, are marked out as essentially 'social policy bodies' (Chaney and Drakeford, 2004: 124). As such they immediately signal new ingredients in terms of the content of social policy but also open up new terms for the debate on *domestic* social policy along comparative and transnational lines. An interest in the geo-political parameters of social policy analysis is not in itself new; see, for example, Clarke's (2004) work on national welfare policy in the context of globalisation and the work of the comparative theorists (*inter alia* Esping-Andersen, 1996; Cochrane *et al.*, 2001; Alcock and Craig, 2001). However, viewing policy fields *within* the UK along comparative lines or from a multi-nation UK perspective is now subject to unprecedented attention, not as sub-state or local state entities but as comparative and transnational welfare states. Some areas that have recently been given the similarities/differences treatment are child poverty (see, for example, Lohde, 2005), early years policy (Wincott, 2005) as well as in the policy domain of health (see Greer, 2005) and work on ethnic minorities (cf. Williams and De Lima, 2006). Adams and Robinson (2002) have offered a model for intra-UK comparative analysis, and new conceptual frameworks and methodologies are emerging, largely borrowed from political science. It is notable, however, that this trajectory is not being led from *within* the mainstream of academic social policy, but driven by cross-disciplinary influence or by those who previously wrote about country-specific developments venturing into new types of comparison beyond England/Wales, or England/Scotland. This type of analysis traditionally focused on what is often termed, somewhat problematically, the centre/periphery trajectory. Such a trajectory was also reflected in the ESRC's Devolution and Constitutional Change research programme between 2000 and 2006 in which again political science tended to have the dominant presence (www.devolution.ac.uk).

The twist away from the centre/periphery axis represents a major point of departure for the emergent paradigm. The move away from considering England as the heart of the comparative positioning and away from the southern-centric axis of these debates is an interesting development (see Adams and Robinson, 2002). As Greer (2003: 52) points out, this is about England being just one of three or four nations, not the 'norm' against which others are measured. He suggests, for example, that Wales in its own right can engage with the 'world's policy debates' on health care and be subject to global and international influences (2003: 64) and that it is itself a policy laboratory from which other nations can learn.

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The devolved administrations in this way provide a basis for the analysis of transnationalism in their own right, offering up the possibility for new insights around the transnational analysis of social policy. These rediscovered vantage points must provide a new twist to comparative work, which we posit as part of a decentring process. It is possible to consider this as a process of shifting the centre, or the development of multiple and contested centres perhaps related to specific dimensions of analysis. We go as far as suggesting that policy analysis in all the main fields will have to consider 'variance', inequality, diversity and divergence/convergence across the 'home nations', and it could be that this will produce new methodologies and new frameworks for comparison within the wider context of intra- and international social policy.

A paradigmatic shift?

It is fruitful, however, to move beyond the idea that there are ready comparisons to be made relating to policy divergences and/or convergences, to posit the idea of a broader paradigmatic shift. This is to argue that the focus, questions, concepts and methodologies devolution suggest are somehow new or renewed and that it implies new perspectives, and hopefully new understandings, for the discipline. This argument can be developed through a consideration of some key themes central to social policy: 'nation-building', welfare discourses, welfare subjectivities, social divisions, territorial inequalities and the production of knowledge.

Redrawing the terrain: nation and 'nation-building'

The organising concept for a consideration of devolution is nation, and 'nation-building' is a key component of the political projects of the devolved governments. The significance of nation to social policy has been well documented (see Williams, 1989; Lewis, 2000). Clarke's work is instructive here, analysing the nation/state/welfare 'trinity' (2004: 28) and suggesting nations as a 'potent source of attachment', which have both material and symbolic resonance for the citizen. The 'multiple contexts' approach to UK social policymaking (and *remaking*) provides a particular 'spin' on the analysis of nation and social policy. Simply stated, Scotland/Wales/Northern Ireland become the frame of reference for a consideration of/or construction of 'social problems' in themselves, and act as primary sites for the contestation of social citizenship. This contemporary indigenisation of policy has a strong political referent in terms of 'nation-building' and cannot be seen as simply pragmatic responses to the specificity of the sub-UK contexts. In Scotland, for instance, policies such as on free long-term care for elderly people or student fees are couched notably in terms of their 'Scottishness', the idea of 'Scottish solutions to Scottish problems' (see Mooney and Scott, 2005).

'Nation-building' suggests a picture of homogenisation which is ever far removed from the mix of identities, class and national backgrounds that

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increasingly characterise Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. However, the idea that these countries are somehow distinct in the problems they throw up and that they provide the most appropriate locale for determining responses is in the case of Scotland and Wales further paralleled by a strong 'ethnic' or 'nationalistic' case for self-determination. We call this a process of 're-nationalisation' and, however problematic, its symbiotic relationship with the processes of Europeanisation, globalisation and neo-liberalisation dictates new terrains of analysis.

The construction of national 'publics' in the constituent parts of the UK is well underway with a number of concomitant spin offs. As the policy community is transmogrifying to a much more network-based system of governance (Newman, 2001) so new actors appear in the political arena. This is occurring everywhere, but, it can be argued, subject to a particular construction within the national contexts. In the new constituencies, organisations and groups have been mobilised in response to 're-nationalisation'. For example, in Wales the idea of a 'Welsh civil society' is emerging, as opposed to a civil society in Wales (Hodgson, 2004; Day, 2002), as is the mobilisation of English ethnicity in Wales around access to key resources of welfare such as housing. Lines of association that might previously have been co-national now follow country borders. These new lines of association bring together amalgamations of different stakeholder groups and change the nature of relationships between them and in turn produce novel experiments in the democratisation of welfare.

Alongside this redrawing of the parameters of the terrain there has been significant institutional realignments. Post devolution a number of organisations have rebranded themselves to follow national borders. In Wales, for example, Stonewall Cymru, Citizens Advice Cymru, Barnardos Cymru are organisations that have shifted their focus to Welsh concerns, moved their head offices into Wales, developed infrastructures for national coverage and altered their practices to respond to the new government bodies. There are shifting relationships here between professional bodies, trade unions, the third sector, business organisations and different government departments across the UK. As such, Wales and Scotland are being redrawn and reconstructed institutionally as geo-political entities.

These new configurations suggest something about the construction of social problems and its national referents but also raise questions about conditionalities, solidarities and the reworking of welfare settlements. Clarke aptly points out that the 'coexistence of residual and emergent formations alongside the current dominant tendencies is a reminder that the formations of welfare, state and nation are unsettled and that their reconstruction is *unfinished*' (2004: 29) (emphasis in original). It can be suggested, therefore, that devolution foregrounds this 'unfinished' business of destabilisation and/or reconstructions of nation as a site of contestation.

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Visions and utopias: geo-political pluralism

There may be considerable disagreement as to the extent to which devolution represents a significant departure in terms of divergent policymaking. It is a simple enough task to point to policy differences such as free personal care for the sick and elderly or the student fees policy in Scotland, or free prescriptions and the abolition of school league tables in Wales. Some would argue the differences are marginal to the overarching continuities ensured by Labour-dominated administrations (at least prior to the May 2007 elections) across the devolved polities, and the quiet manipulation of the policy strings by civil servants in Whitehall (Hudson and Lowe, 2004). It is clearly important to view devolution within the context of the New Labour 'modernising' project and as a product of its wider socio-economic and neo-liberal agendas. The devolved Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are part of this mission. However, it can be argued that the devolved nations open up new sites of struggle and contestation, new processes and practices which challenge the ideological and geo-political boundaries of the British Welfare State, and this encapsulates a significant shift which impacts on the central concerns of the discipline. Interestingly, Clarke, writing within a transnational frame, draws our attention to these very limits of neo-liberalism in practice as it forms an interface with particular geopolitical and cultural entities, when he says this philosophy may encounter 'diverse forms of resistance and refusals to "go with the flow"'(2004: 9).

Mishra (1977) raised a number of issues in relation to the normative basis of social interventionism, not least the identification of its ideological underpinnings. His concern was with the parameters of liberal capitalism and the tension this posed for what he calls 'honest' welfare-orientated values. This tension appears as a theme of devolution with, for example in Wales, an avowed rhetoric to offer some resistance to neo-liberal welfare policy, and more recently claims by the SNP following their election success in May 2007 that they would reject New Labour's approach to public services. It has been forcefully argued (and indeed problematised) that Scotland and Wales are developing welfare discourses that diverge from the strictures of mainstream New Labour-speak (see, for example, Davies, 2003). In Scotland this may have a long history and arguably these can be reinforced through devolution. In Wales the First Minister, Rhodri Morgan, at the opening of the second term of office, committed himself to placing 'clear red water' between Westminster and Cardiff (Morgan, 2002), and constructed his arguments around what he identified as three 'ideological fault lines' in approaches to social welfare: universalism versus means testing, equality versus choice, and equality of opportunity versus 'the fundamentally socialist aim of equality of outcome'. There have been several policy directions that indicate the Welsh direction as built on a philosophy that markedly differs from Westminster, not least the citizen-focused approach to public services (WAG, 2007) and the principle of distribution based on the notion of 'progressive universalism'

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(Drakeford, 2007). It can be suggested that this reflects a distinctive ideological base. Rhodri Morgan (2002) claims that 'The actions of the Welsh Assembly Government clearly owe more to the traditions of Titmuss, Tawney, Beveridge and Bevan rather than those of Hayek and Friedman'. As such, and returning to the issue of welfare retrenchment raised at the outset, commentators such as Stewart (2004) and Adams and Schmeuker (2005) among others make the somewhat controversial and problematic claims that it is increasingly 'the English', under the impact of more radical New Labour policies, that are divergent from the classic welfare state, not the devolved administrations in Wales or Scotland which are often uncritically constructed as 'defenders of the welfare state'. The coherence of the ideological differentiation is, of course, open to debate. Nevertheless, however limited in practice or whatever their rationale, the collectivist aspirations are a core feature of social policy rhetoric, if not policy and practice, in Scotland and Wales.

The issue for the discipline, as well as for the analysis of social policy in the devolved UK, then, is not simply one of competing perspectives of welfare (theoretical pluralism) but a trajectory that flags potentially diverse ways of doing and emerging 'ways of life' (Pfau-Effinger, 2005) organised around discourses of nation. This indicates an unsettling, though not entirely, of both the 'certainties' and assumed homogeneity of 'the British welfare state' in the light of competing 'welfarisms', even if this still strikes a salient chord with the national popular. The problem of values or the normative basis of interventionism can be presented as one axis in the decentring of mainstream social policy analysis.

Welfare subjectivities and territorial citizenship: does where you live matter?

Devolution was not intended to produce radically different citizenship rights across the nations, but by definition it has the potential to produce differing experiences of welfare as these interrelate with factors of place, history and ways of life, as well as differing popular imaginings of welfare. Arguably, 'place' has not significantly registered in the discussion of new welfare subjectivities other than perhaps in relation to the generic rural/urban distinctions or more recently with regard to concerns with 'problem' places and 'problem' people. In the conceptual discussion framing the Care, Values and the Future of Welfare (CAVA 2000) research, Williams charts a number of fields of analysis aimed at exploring the dynamics between subjectivity, agency and identity and aspects of social structure, such as the discursive and institutional contexts at subnational, national and international levels. She identifies aspects of governance as one such contextual factor providing 'the social topography of enablement and constraint' in which individuals perform, negotiate, act upon and draw on welfare resources (2000: 13). It can be suggested that there is considerable potential within the devolutionary

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framework for new discursive/analytical trajectories as discourses, ideas and practices of nation, community, locality and place return to critically inform care giving and receiving, issues of crime prevention, managing 'disorder' and aspects of service delivery (for example, 'community planning' or 'community safety') within the context of national cultures.

The interrelationship between identity/culture and care is signalled more forcibly in the context of devolution, and sometimes in very practical ways, for example in the emerging literature around Welsh language provision and rights of access to welfare for Welsh language speakers. Similarly, the quality of citizenship involvement and the experiential nature of citizenship are, arguably, being transformed under devolution. The literature suggests that 'publics' (or perhaps more correctly, some of them) in the constituent nations have been engaged in more direct dialogue with government and that accordingly there is scope for a revitalisation of an ambiguous 'civil society' (Hodgson, 2004). All these trends speak to the contextual conditions for the (hoped *for*) democratisation of social policymaking. Thus, the idea of diversity in social policy is given spatial dimensions, and herein lays the potential for new methodologies that build in a territorial dimension to experiential welfare as the significance of place and more broadly nation in the meaning of welfare is reorganised and re-emphasised.

An associated dimension of spatial diversity is the issue of territorial justice and injustice. This issue takes us beyond imbalances in resourcing (note, for example, renewed debates in late 2007 about the Barnett funding formula (see Fraser, 2007) towards the idea of justified imbalances and public perceptions of these). Debates around the provision of personal care for the elderly in Scotland or free prescriptions in Wales are contemporary examples of such territorial politics. The 'postcode lottery' takes on new contours under devolution in that now it is not 'inadvertent' – as, for example, illustrated by Tudor Hart's inverse care law – but is seen as structured, has become more significant in the public mind and is seen as more amenable to change. Mooney argues devolution 'brings into sharp relief questions about social and territorial injustice, belongings, exclusions, mobilisations, inequalities and social divisions' that deserve greater examination (Mooney, 2006: 2). This reshaped interventionism inevitably implies a new role for the centre. Some devolutionists have argued for the limiting of policy divergence and suggest the role of the centre in 'holding the ring' particularly on inequities and inequalities (Jeffrey, 2002). However, again new and interesting questions are raised for analysis about the shifts and tensions *vis-à-vis* the centre as issues of universalism/particularism and the issue of the distribution of power and resources come into view more acutely. Outcomes matter in social policy, and the philosophical basis on which differential outcomes are justified raises important questions for the discipline.

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Social policy 'knowledges'

Part of the process of 'rethinking' social policy has been a call for the broadening of its concerns. Writers such as Cahill (1994) pointed to an expansion of the content of social policy to include aspects of environment and consumption. With devolution, new content pours into social policy fields. An example of this is Horgan's (2006) work on conflict in Northern Ireland and its interplay with social policy issues, in particular poverty and inequality. Such analysis might lead to the conceptual development of issues of conflict in mediating welfare need and welfare delivery more generally – at the interface with issues of war, 'ethnic' riots/asylum seeker hatred, class, religious and ethnic conflict. This will inevitably lead to new research priorities for the subject area emerging as relevant and legitimate. This idea of the devolved constituencies as national policy 'laboratories' is one that is featuring in the literature, and while this language speaks to the empiricist tradition, the implication is of insights gleaned from experimentation in one part of the UK enabling policy transfer. Notable examples here include the ban on smoking in enclosed public spaces introduced in Scotland in March 2006 and then in Wales in April 2007 and in England in July 2007, and the 'Fresh Talent' initiative in Scotland, the provision of extended permits to live and work in Scotland to non-EU graduates of Scottish universities, has led to similar policies being introduced for the rest of the UK at the end of 2005.

It is important to acknowledge here the way in which 'knowledges' emerge and are legitimated within mainstream social policy and how this in turn reflects wider power relations. Wales is a case in point. Day (2002: 3) cogently draws attention to the particular positioning of what he calls 'marginal' contexts in the wider sociological imagination. His argument is that nation theorists such as, for example, McCrone (2001) in the Scottish context and Rees and Rees (1980) in the Welsh context have not only lobbied to draw attention to a neglected field of sociological analysis (that is, Scotland/Wales) but have by definition prompted a re/*theorisation of the conventional model of society itself* through such juxtapositioning. That is to say, by theorising Wales we not only have to construct some conception of what 'Wales' (or Scotland or England or indeed the UK) 'is', but in doing so raise questions about the suggested 'national' norm of social policy accounts, thereby problematising dominant conceptions.

This process takes on a new force under devolution. Re-theorising the presumption of the 'national' – both UK multi-national and Scottish/Welsh/English national – also poses a challenge to the mainstream production of knowledge in social policy. The power to define what matters and what is deemed relevant is challenged. The power to define what appears in the mainstream journals and what should be the appropriate vantage point for considering issues comes under critical scrutiny. Day (2002: 5) notes in relation to sociological

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analysis, not only the marginalisation of work from Wales, which is often dismissed as parochial within the wider British social science community, but a dearth of a critical academic mass in Wales, resulting in a poverty of knowledge, with large and important topics under-explored.

This has been no less the case in social policy terms. In social policy literature and research, in statistical data and in terms of research funding, the modus operandi has largely been 'for Wales read England'. This tendency is wholly quantifiable and demonstrable with, to take one example, very few texts dedicated to the idea of a social policy of Wales and by the difficulty academics face in justifying academic contributions that are Wales-focused or placed solely in Welsh journals in securing recognition within the research assessment exercise. While Scotland, arguably, may have benefited from a more buoyant literature base reflecting its historical autonomy, arguably these outputs have also been marginalised. The reasons for this undoubtedly lie in the centralisation of power in the UK state historically, but as yet these are not well rehearsed within the discipline of social policy. As such 'knowledges' gain in status, so in turn they represent part of the process of *decentring* within the discipline of social policy.

Wales is emerging with devolution as a legitimated research field. Increasingly, offerings to major social policy journals are recognised in terms of their comparative potential. There has been a steady expansion of the social policy community with new policy organisations and think tanks being established, such as the Institute of Welsh Affairs and a flurry of research and literature outputs and research funding specifically targeted at Wales. Adams and Robinson point out that the push for an inclusive politics brought to the fore the need to bolster policy-making capacity in the new nation-states and suggest, 'Whether by choice or circumstance, such an approach has successfully enhanced the quality of public policy in the devolved territories' (2002: 204). The development of governance rather than government is evidenced by the increased use of public meetings, citizens' dialogues and consultation exercises in the devolved administrations and these fora in themselves provide new bases for the generation and legitimation of knowledge. More open access and user participation are fundamental to the process of decentring within the discipline with the aspirational shift from 'expert' to expertise. This enhanced and empowered constituency presents a challenge to the power relations within the discipline in terms of what knowledge counts.

Another facet of the way in which new knowledges are emerging is the increased multi-disciplinarity of the subject area forged by devolution. Political scientists have emerged as dominating the academic commentary on devolution to date, and it has been argued elsewhere that a critically informed social policy perspective has much to offer to the analysis and understanding of devolution (see Mooney *et al.*, 2006). Interestingly, the language of social policy is being subtly

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transformed by reference to a language imported cross discipline. The language of policy transfers, policy learning, pathway dependency, policy laboratories, virtuous circles and other political science terms are being adopted uncritically in the devolution literature. This language may be innocuous, but bodies of language/discourses are transformative and, it can be suggested, represent another potential tramline of a decentring process. In terms, therefore, of the conceptual base/language, the methodology, perspectives, content and – most acutely – the power base within the discipline, we are seeing the beginnings of a paradigmatic shift.

It is important, however, that we bear in mind Mishra's caution regarding the encroachment of the empiricist tradition as devolution may become merely an exercise in the 'technicist arid policymaking' of the traditional social administration approach rather than a trajectory of critical 'rethinking' within the discipline. A plethora of literature has emerged on devolution very much focused on institutional perspectives that uncritically present 'the facts' with assumed neutrality. In answer, therefore, to the 'Where next for social policy?' question *vis-à-vis* devolution, this trend has the potential to respond to the calls for 'putting back the political science' (Lowe) and 'for social administration' (Spicker), but as we contend it is more usefully considered as part of expanding the *imaginary* of social policy towards a focus on the interplay of context and welfare subjectivities, highlighting the ways in which geo-political elements of history, culture combine with socio-political and economic factors.

Seizing the moment: decentring social policy?

Globalisation, Europeanisation, transnationalism and renationalisation are recognised as parallel processes with multiple and differing impacts on the UK state. Globalisation, Rhodes (1994) argues, has heralded the 'hollowing out of the British state' to a system of much more dispersed power. Hudson and Lowe further argue that constitutional change has 'shifted the centre of gravity of the unitary state' (2004: 95). In this vein, the focus on the emerging *multi*-nation-statism at UK level we have suggested has significant implications for the discipline of social policy. We go as far as to argue it represents a new opportunity in the 'rethinking' tradition in social policy. While the centralisation of power was the hallmark of the 'traditional' welfare state, devolved power is the 'logo' of the contemporary welfare arrangements with a number of concomitant factors, even if much of that power continues to be centralised and 'reserved'. Alcock's speculation on the future of social policy (1998: 12) as being increasingly characterised by geographical pluralism acknowledges the significance of this trajectory, if not all its potentials. We have put forward the argument that devolution represents the potential for a paradigm shift for the discipline in that it foregrounds a new

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form of pluralism, not simply as a delivery mechanism within welfare pluralism but as a *geo-political pluralism*: in very particular ways opening up new routes of analysis within the broader context of the UK welfare settlement and emerging re-settlements (in the plural). These tramlines bring to the fore old/new questions and some old/new themes, tensions, contradictions which await exploration. There are exciting opportunities here for the discipline of social policy.

The devolution debate *re-engages* with a number of established social policy issues: for example, territorial equity/justice, subsidiarity versus solidarity, liberty, equality and diversity, universalism, particularism, the questioning of the welfare settlement, and the old welfare state and new welfare state arguments and citizenship debates. It helps to ignite the discourse on the democratisation of welfare in very particular ways, and again draws our attention to the interrelationship between economic and social policy. It relates in new and differing ways with the recently emerging literature on transnational social policy/policies. However, it also raises new narratives in terms of the construction of 'social problems', their content and the social relations of welfare. It summons a new perspective; in particular, it offers a critical vantage point on centrist welfare policy analysis: a counter to the 'distortions' Mishra signalled. In addition, it brings into view the significance of *place* to welfare identifications, access and association and thus to other sources of wellbeing, such as the environment, rurality, 'civil society' and other infra-political involvements. It also signals a revisiting of issues of social divisions, social inequality and social justice; of class, ethnicity and race, gender (and other exclusionary positionings) at the interface with nation in the constituent parts of the UK. We suggest this is a major redrawing of the social policy map.

We are nonetheless faced with considering both the tensions and possibilities devolution portends for the discipline: to reflect it uncritically as an exercise in the technocratic pragmatism of the neo-liberal agenda is one possibility, or to engage with it as part of the 'expanding the social policy imaginary' approach (Lewis, 2000). We contend that devolution represents a potential paradigmatic shift for the discipline if we engage with it as a new dimension in the 'rethinking' story of contestation, conflicts and struggles over welfare arrangements, delivery and outcomes, through the forging of new arenas of analysis, new methodologies and concepts in a multi-nation, neo-liberal UK.

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