

Book Reviews

Research for Action: Cross-national Perspectives on Connecting Knowledge, Policy, and Practice for Children by Robert J. Chaskin & Jona M. Rosenfeld (eds.). 2008: Oxford University Press. ISBN 978-0-19531-408-3

Social service agencies throughout the USA and Europe are increasingly turning to evidence-based practice as a strategy for ethical, informed service delivery. Policy makers too, while sometimes moved to action by anecdote, are using data more than ever to anchor decision making. But how do data come to influence policy makers, and what role do researchers play as instruments of change? Robert Chaskin and Jona Rosenfeld's edited volume, *Research for Action*, addresses these questions and others, and provides sound advice to bridge the research-policy divide.

This unique volume uses six case studies to frame a range of questions relating to knowledge development, knowledge dissemination, and research utilization for policy makers, administrators, and practitioners. The case studies are drawn from six countries including Northern Ireland, South Africa, the USA, Israel, UK, and the Republic of Ireland. The case studies are unified by their focus on children's services, and the structure of each case study is relatively similar, including a description of the socio-political and service context, a description of the research study, communication techniques used among researchers and end-users, dissemination strategies, and ultimate outcomes. These similarities are well constructed, making the cross-national comparisons easy to grasp for the reader; the range of studies focused on children's issues is equally appealing for readers whose interests align with those of the authors. Indeed, complimentary texts on aging services, mental health services, and/or disability services, for example, would be a welcome addition to the field.

The editors of this volume clearly set out to develop a single volume with a unified voice and purpose; this is not simply a collection of essays, but instead is a work of various authors artfully woven together by its editors. The authors appear to mirror the proscriptions set out in the book, creating a learning collective among researchers. Each chapter is not only descriptive of the research-policy connection, but is also self-critical of the researcher's role in forwarding agency, administrative, or policy change as a result of their research activities. For example, some chapters (e.g. South Africa and the USA) speak to the significant successes of research-informed policy, whereas others (e.g. the Republic of Ireland) speak to the actions or inactions of researchers that may have limited change in the practice and policy arenas.

The lessons learned across these diverse sites, using different research methodologies (e.g. some are descriptive studies, some explanatory, and some exploratory) are enormously instructive to researchers and students of research who want to make a difference. For too long, research has been used largely to inform the academy. Researchers have been insufficiently prepared, educated, and/or supported in their efforts to influence the broader field of policy and practice, and have been reluctant to do so for fear of being viewed as biased and thus unscientific. *Research for action* provides concrete suggestions to help researchers balance the line between research and advocacy, to clarify researchers' roles vis-à-vis government and agency actors, and to guide researchers in their quest to be relevant in real, political time. This volume is a must-read for researchers

and students of research whose passion for improved services to children and families drives their daily work.

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Social Security in Ireland 1939–1952: The Limits to Solidarity by Sophia Carey. 2007: Irish Academic Press. ISBN 978-0-71652-860-9 (paperback) 978-0-71653-359-7 (hardback)

This well-written and well-presented book is a welcome addition to a theoretically underdeveloped literature on social security in Ireland. The book is highly relevant and its observations help us understand patterns of state formation and the role of the state in Irish economic and social development, as well as the path-dependent present and future development of Irish social security policy.

The book offers a valuable case study that succeeds in explaining at a theoretical and empirical level why so much cross-national variation is evident in how states deal with what might seem to be fairly universal problems. Of the three theoretical approaches outlined – industrialisation/modernisation, class/politics and institutionalism/state-centred approaches – the institutional approach appears most convincing in explaining Irish social security development. The arguments about strong veto points (Department of Finance and economic ministries, p. 108), civil servants and coalition government (p. 151) are particularly convincing.

A very welcome feature of the book is the author's willingness to draw clear conclusions. Most striking are the bold and convincing arguments the author makes that two traditional institutions, the Catholic Church and Corporatism, long regarded as key influences in Irish social security policy, are less relevant than they are popularly perceived to be. The separation of continental corporatism and Irish catholic corporatism is convincing and relevant to contemporary debates about the Irish model of social partnership. The author clearly illustrates the relative absence of the Church as an institutional player in social security policy when compared with the strong church presence in health and education policy. Valuable lessons for today's social policy community, they remind us that conventional wisdoms about who is who in the policy process should never be taken at face value.

The absence of such power bases strengthens state-based institutional theoretical explanations. However, institutional explanations are tempered with a healthy argument that politics matters – in this case agrarian politics impacted on political party policy positions. The conclusion that outcomes are not automatic and that politics shape welfare states is important to today's students of social policy. In an era where inequality is often portrayed as inevitable, the book reminds us to pay attention to the processes by which demands of industrial societies are translated into outcomes (p. 22). A second valuable lesson is how the resolution of parties' differences over issues of solidarity and redistributive issues in favour of Fianna Fail's tax-based approach resulted in the legacy of a high contemporary reliance on means-testing – a clear argument example of path dependency. It is regrettable that the author's discussion of the role of politics is limited to that of party

politics and, in particular, the role of ministers in policy debate. Discussion about the role of other political agency is largely missing or relegated to an end note (p. 238). There is, for example, no discussion of the impact wider social movements, such as the unemployed workers' movement which stood Dail candidates in 1953, may have had on policy debate at the time. There is, however, useful and illuminating evidence of global influences on the policy system. While the dominant 1950s influence of the International Labour Organisation is an interesting contrast to the 21st-century influence of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, there is much continuity in Ireland's policy transfer relationship with English-speaking nations.

The most disappointing aspect of the book, from the perspective of this reviewer, was the failure to develop a gender analysis. This is puzzling in the light of the author's own assertion that Ireland represents a strong variant of the 'male bread winner' (p. 49). The author's conscious decision not to pursue this theme meant a lost opportunity to explore more thoroughly the gendered development of Irish social insurance in this era. The end note 6 of Chapter Six (p. 243) shows that the government was concerned that provision in the 1951 bill for equal treatment for single men and women could provoke discussion about the 'controversial issue of equal pay for equal work'. This surely deserves more illumination, as does the process of determining the different gendered married rates proposed in the same bill. The decision to omit 'relatives assisting' (often women) from social insurance coverage still impacts on women in the 21st century. There is still significant resistance to removing such anomalies in a patriarchal state more sensitive to agrarian land politics than gender equality. This gap means there is an under-exploration and, one assumes, an under-estimation of the role of women's agency in the development of Irish social security at that time. A failure to explore in greater detail the gender politics of the time may also have led to some under-estimation of the moral influence of the Catholic Church in perpetuating the male breadwinner approach.

Is a book centred on a case study of Irish social security of interest to a wider international audience? Its clear theoretical foundations make the book relevant to anyone attempting to explain or understand why welfare states develop different responses to similar challenges. The underpinning institutional and political theoretical perspectives about who and what influences distributive policies are well developed and accessibly presented, and the case study of Ireland requires little prior knowledge of the interested reader.

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Pensions by Michael Hill. 2007: Policy Press. ISBN 978-1-86134-851-7

This book is part of a new series – *Policy and Politics in the Twenty-First Century* – which is aimed at general readers to inform them about policy issues of the day. Since the UK pension system has just undergone the most thorough review since the days of Beveridge, following major failures in the private pension market, 'pensions' is an appropriate starting point for the series.

The audience is, however, predominantly British. The starting point is a brief history of the UK pension system, which is later contrasted with others and found wanting. The issues facing the British system are taken as the starting point and then compared with the way other countries are dealing with them.

The issue discussed first is that of pension adequacy, or inadequacy. UK public pensions are some of the lowest in the Western world, so this is understandable. The fact that the UK average replacement rate is not that far below other countries when private pensions are included is not emphasised. Other European countries have been struggling to pull back on the generous promises they made. The recent UK Pensions Commission recommended *raising* the pension level provided by the state for the general population so as to make the private second tier model viable. Without that move, most of the population would have become dependent on means-tested state pensions and their incentive to save would have been jeopardised. The fact that the UK government has accepted this diagnosis and changed tack is of fundamental importance but is rather played down in this volume.

The second issue dealt with by this book that many other countries are facing is that of raising the normal retirement age for full state pension. Again, this is being done in the UK as a (partial) way of paying for the more generous state pension. Hill makes the valid point that the length of the working life is only one facet of a wider problem of funding welfare services. The levels and intensity of paid and unpaid work across the household and through time interact with fertility levels and services for children, family-friendly practices by employers and invalidity benefit rules. It is not just a matter of forcing up the legal retirement age. What matters is the age at which people leave the labour force and how long they have been in it.

The complex issue of whether and how far to create privately funded pension schemes is another issue central to UK pension policy. Hill makes a stab at explaining the economics, drawing on Barr's work especially. Here, I think, he understates the significant shift in economic thought that is taking place internationally. Time was when the case for funding was being pushed as a worldwide panacea by the World Bank and a whole school of economics. Now this view is being successfully challenged. The Bank itself has admitted that robust and well-regulated financial markets are a necessary precondition for such a pattern and they do not exist in much of the world. The economic advantages of funding over pay-as-you-go schemes are not that decisive and, left to themselves, individuals do not make well-informed decisions about the future. A whole new branch of behavioural economics is beginning to inform policy. It was decisive in shaping the UK Pensions Commission proposals, for example. Hill's distrust of economics perhaps blinds him to the importance of some of these shifts. Like it or not, economics dominates the analytics of pension provision. Where that analytics is leading us and why and how it interacts with policy in different countries is an important theme for comparative pension policy analysis.

Overall, this is a UK-focused book using comparative material to help a UK audience put their debate into context. This is no reason to dismiss what it has to say, but it needs to be understood by anyone seeking to use it for wider teaching purposes in other countries.

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Ethics: Contemporary Challenges in Health and Social Care by Audrey Leathard and Susan McLaren (eds.). 2007: Policy Press. ISBN 978-1-86134-755-8

This book is a wide-ranging work that addresses some of the more compelling ethical issues and challenges in health and social care. It quite rightly responds to a gap in the ethics literature – social care – and the editors have assembled a strong collection (on the whole) that interrogates the place of ethics in