

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Jane Millar (ed.), *Understanding Social Security: Issues for Policy and Practice*, Bristol, The Policy Press, 2003, xxiv + 335 pp., ISBN 1-86134-419-8**

This book is one of two new titles opening a new series on *Understanding Welfare: Social Issues, Policy and Practice* with Saul Becker (from Loughborough University) as Series Editor. The book is designed to act as a text for Social Policy students. There is a considerable need for such a text in the UK as the main existing text (*Social Security in Britain* by Stephen McKay and Karen Rowlingson) was published in 1999 and is now somewhat out of date, having been written before many of the Labour government's recent reforms had been developed or introduced. McKay and Rowlingson, as it happens, are both contributors to the book under review, which provides extensive coverage of the wide range of developments within social security that have been introduced by the 'New Labour' government in Britain since it came into office in 1997.

*Understanding Social Security* is an edited collection. The editor, Jane Millar, was Director of the Annual Summer School of the Department for Work and Pensions (formerly the Department of Social Security) from 1996 until last year, and the contributors have all been tutors at the Summer School. They are not only specialists on social security but also have experience of teaching social security staff as well as university students. As Saul Becker explains in the Foreword, the book 'cuts through the policy rhetoric to offer insights into how and why policy is made, how it is implemented, and what its outcomes are for those at the receiving end.' (p.xx).

As Jane Millar also points out in her introductory chapter, '[s]ocial security policy is changing both in respect of key goals and the means to achieve these' (p.1), and the changes made by 'New Labour' since it came into office in 1997, which have even included dropping the words 'social security' from the name of the Department responsible for social security, have certainly been extensive. The contributors are well placed to document these changes, and this they do well. The book is, in our opinion, an excellent and up-to-date guide to recent developments in social security policy in the UK, written by those who know a great deal about them. This is the main strength of the book.

The coverage of the book is wide-ranging: Part 1 focuses on the policy context and includes a chapter on the global context that all policy now resides within; Part 2, on 'changing goals', focuses on different claimant

groups; since, as Jane Millar's introductory chapter explains, it is claimant groups, rather than benefit types, that have increasingly become the focus of policy development; Part 3 focuses on delivery, which is now a key feature of policy development in light of the government's commitment to 'modernise' the public services. In all cases recent changes are documented in detail and clearly explained. Readers of this book will gain a full understanding of the direction and achievements of Labour's social security policy reforms.

This is a great strength, especially for students from outside the UK who are looking for a comprehensive and accessible account of social security policy under the new government. Some features of UK policies attract the attention of scholars and students outside Britain, such as welfare to work policies, the relation between benefits and taxes, and benefit delivery problems and practices, and these are discussed in the book. As far as problems of delivery are concerned, benefit fraud is more extensively discussed than the problem of non-take-up. This contrasts with earlier British texts on social policy and possibly reflects a change in the cultural climate surrounding social security issues in Britain today.

Table 1 (on p.3), which provides a systematised overview of types of provision of income maintenance, will be particularly helpful for non-UK readers. The fact that, in addition, to social security schemes 'proper', tax schemes and occupational schemes are also included shows that, like the Government, the authors have a broader view of social security than one which equates it with state provided income benefits and allowances.

Exactly what should be understood by social security, however, is not clear because the book does not provide any definition of social security. Although definitional issues are not all that important in books that focus on practical policies, a discussion of definitions would have been interesting and useful, not least because the UK's social security system differs in some important respects from the social security systems in other European countries. Nevertheless, the book clearly conveys the message that social security is not first and foremost aimed solely at poverty reduction, a viewpoint that sometimes distinguishes Anglo-Saxon from continental European thinking. And, in this respect, non-UK readers will not regard the book as typically British.

What does seem to be typical for a British discussion of social security is the focus on how social security affects the lives and circumstances of children, which is now a clear policy priority for government. What the book lacks, from a continental European perspective, is a discussion of the division of responsibilities between the state and the social partners regarding the design, financing, and administration of social security. This may reflect the

highly centralised character of the UK social security system, which possibly makes such a discussion less urgent.

Arguably, the book's strength in addressing current policy issues is also a potential weakness. By focusing on recent changes the book does not provide a clear and concise guide to the history, structure and working of social security policy; and, by having a number of different contributors, the book lacks the consistency and coherence of a single-authored (or jointly-authored) book. It is not, therefore, a replacement for McKay and Rowlingson's text, and the gap in the market still remains – perhaps they will now turn their hands to updating their text.

In keeping with the pedagogic aspirations of the series, however, the book has been carefully designed to work as a tool for learning as well as a reference book. There are plenty of tables with up-to-date statistics on trends in benefit costs and delivery. All the chapters include boxed summaries interspersed throughout the text; and they all conclude with four or five questions to stimulate discussion. All the chapters contain separate reference lists and lists of key Websites. All of this will be of great value to student readers. However, there is considerable duplication in the Website listings and, given that a comprehensive listing is provided in the Appendix, it is not clear that all of them are necessary. The discussion questions vary from those that test the reader's comprehension of the material in the chapter (as in Chapter 12) to those that invite speculation on policies issues or dilemmas (as in Chapter 5). Both have value, of course; but more consistent use of them might have been more helpful to students.

As we said earlier, however, the longer historical and policy context is not very well documented in this book. This is linked to our concern that, because of its topicality, the book may rapidly become out-of-date – especially if policy change continues to take place as rapidly as it has done over the last six years. There will be a strong case for a regular updating of a book like this one – it is to be hoped that the contributors are prepared for this.

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