

Stream: 3. Comparative Methodology: Neglected Issues and Innovative Methods: Identifying Best practices

Title: The neglected dependent variable: problems in assessing and interpreting developments in case loads and benefit reciprocity

Abstract:

Comparative welfare state research so far has primarily been centred around three kinds of dependent variables: (1) expenditure patterns, (2) social rights and benefit generosity, (3) income redistribution and poverty alleviation. In view of the fact that so-called activation and the reduction of benefit dependency has been at the centre of most welfare state reforms of the past decades, it somehow comes as a surprise that a fourth possible dependent variable appears to have been conspicuously absent in this kind of research: benefit reciprocity case loads. One reason for this neglect is related to a lack of data. In spite of the fact that most governments proclaim to reduce benefit dependency rates, they rarely publish comprehensive data on case loads of the various transfer programmes. The OECD, dependent as it ultimately is on national administrative data, has hardly more to offer. So far the only attempt to assemble and standardise national administrative data on case loads dates back to the late 1990s when the Dutch Ministry of Labour commissioned a study on this matter that covered nine European countries, Japan and the US for the period 1980-1997. The OECD has sought to improve the comparability of this database and updated it for a few subsequent years, but some of these updates turn out to be mere extrapolations.

The purpose of the proposed paper is twofold: (1) to discuss various modes of assessing case load, and (2) to present some evidence of the development of case load of the most important working age benefit programmes in a selected number of countries. The main goal of the paper is to investigate how far one can go with these kinds of data. It starts by addressing some of the methodological problems (issues of comparability, of functional equivalence, of standardisation etc.). It illustrates some of these problems using national administrative data that have been collected for ten European countries covering the period 1980-2009 as part of a Recwowe project on the regulation of the risk of unemployment in Europe. In subsequent steps the trends in case load developments are related to changes in benefit generosity (measured in terms of disaggregated social expenditure and replacement rates).

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