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**THE FUTURE ESS 4 MODULE ON WELFARE ATTITUDES:  
STAKES, CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS**

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## THE FUTURE ESS 4 MODULE ON WELFARE ATTITUDES: STAKES, CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

In April 2007, an international team led by Stefan Svallfors from Umeå University has been granted a rotating module on welfare attitudes for the upcoming fourth ESS (European Social Survey) round in 2008<sup>1</sup>. The module is entitled *Welfare attitudes in a changing Europe*, and is intended to assess the attitudes, perceptions and evaluations of welfare policies of representative samples across a large number of European countries. The present contribution briefly outlines stakes, challenges and prospects of this new module. It should be noted, however, that the module is still in its planning phase, and that no final decisions as to its content have yet been made.

### I. STAKES OF THE ESS WELFARE ATTITUDES MODULE

We will first evoke the social and political context in which the module takes place and then describe the stakes of the new ESS module.

#### *The context of the new welfare module*

Welfare policies can be seen as a way in which a society organises to meet the common vulnerability and need for protection of its citizens. As such, they are the main institutional instrument designed to regulate relations between unequal groups and individuals and thus to achieve social cohesion within countries. Social cohesion is a fundamental policy goal of the European Union; yet many countries have to struggle hard, in the face of demographic changes and economic scarcity, to keep up or extend welfare policies that will contribute to this goal. For example, the experiences of several of the most recent EU members, along other countries in Eastern Europe, point to the problems of establishing a functioning welfare state amidst resource scarcity and population decline.

Welfare states have faced (and survived) fierce political attacks during the last decades, mainly on grounds of changes in the demographic structure and international economic competition. Major responses to these pressures are the rise of active employment policies, decentralisation of welfare services and widespread cutbacks, for example in healthcare and pension systems, in many European countries (Svallfors & Taylor-Gooby, 1999). Yet, increased and persistent unemployment and new forms of risk, precariousness and vulnerability demonstrate the need for welfare states able to prevent large scale suffering and bitter discontent of large fractions of national populations. Indeed,

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<sup>1</sup> Co-applicants of the project are Wim van Oorschot (University of Tilburg), Peter Taylor-Gooby (University of Kent), Christian Staerklé (University of Geneva), and Jørgen Goul Andersen (University of Aalborg).

national surveys have extensively shown that welfare retrenchment is a highly unpopular course of action (Svallfors, 2006).

Another important development concerns the increased social and cultural diversity welfare states need to address. This diversity is present in several respects, for example concerning (a) increased ethnic diversity among target populations as well as among the populations at large; (b) increased diversity along the life-cycle, creating new forms of risk (and perceptions of risk by members of different groups); (c) increased institutional diversity in the form of provider pluralism and new forms of public management; (d) new forms of policies and state intervention, in particular in relation to work-family reconciliation. In recent years, a number of studies have investigated whether cultural diversity hampers attitudes towards redistribution and thus undermines the foundations of the welfare state (Alesina & Glaeser, 2004; Banting & Kymlicka, 2006).

In this context of welfare reform and welfare retrenchment, a comprehensive picture of welfare attitudes at the international level is timely and urgent, first and foremost because attitudes among European populations towards these changes are likely to have an impact on the changes themselves (Brooks & Manza, 2006). Furthermore, the analysis of welfare attitudes and of their sources of variation both at the individual and at the aggregate level may evidence the foundations of social cohesion with respect to public legitimacy of redistributive policies and institutional intervention in general (Edlund, 2007; Staerklé, Delay, Gianettoni & Roux, 2007).

### *The future ESS welfare module*

The new ESS module will allow assessing the convergence of the wide public support for redistributive welfare policies across European countries in much more detail and depth than was the case in previous studies. It will help to elucidate citizens' experience with and attitudes towards welfare policies and in this way contribute to a more enlightened debate about policy options and choices. The new module will allow significant improvements in terms of international comparative analyses, since it will provide data that are specific enough to reveal possible variations in attitudes between different institutional and cultural environments, but yet comparable across countries. Thus, compared to existing *comparative* data sets, such as the *World Values Studies* and the *International Social Survey Program*, the new ESS module will include more and more specific questions on welfare issues than before. Compared to existing *national* data sets, it will produce comparable data covering issues such as risk perception, perceived legitimacy of the welfare state, views about target groups and claimants, attitudes towards service delivery, views about alternative welfare arrangements and welfare reform. To sum up, the new data are expected to be of value to the European research community for several reasons:

1. Due to the high number of countries which are expected to participate in round 4 of the ESS (at least 25), the new module will make possible rigorous cross-national comparisons of the impact

of cultural and institutional diversity on attitudes towards welfare provision and its financing. Furthermore, it will be possible to analyse the impact of cultural and social diversity within countries, in terms of class, gender, ethnicity, life-styles and life-courses, on attitudes towards welfare policies across Europe. It will thus provide a unique opportunity to survey the interactive effects of social status and national/cultural membership on welfare opinions.

2. Social and economic changes are leading to new forms of diversity, new patterns of vulnerability and new resources, both at the individual and at the institutional level. The module will enable to chart perceptions of these changes in detail and to identify opportunities for the provision of welfare in ways that are appropriate to the current context.
3. European welfare states are under increasing pressure from a number of directions. Population ageing and shifts in family patterns increase needs, while the pressures of globalisation on national competitiveness restrict the capacity to finance expansive welfare policies. In this context, welfare states are accused of damaging social ties and undermining traditional forms of solidarity. New data gathered in a structured way in order to facilitate cross-national comparison will enable the question of the political legitimacy of current welfare reform in different national settings to be thoroughly examined.

## II. CHALLENGES

### *The conceptual framework of the welfare attitudes module*

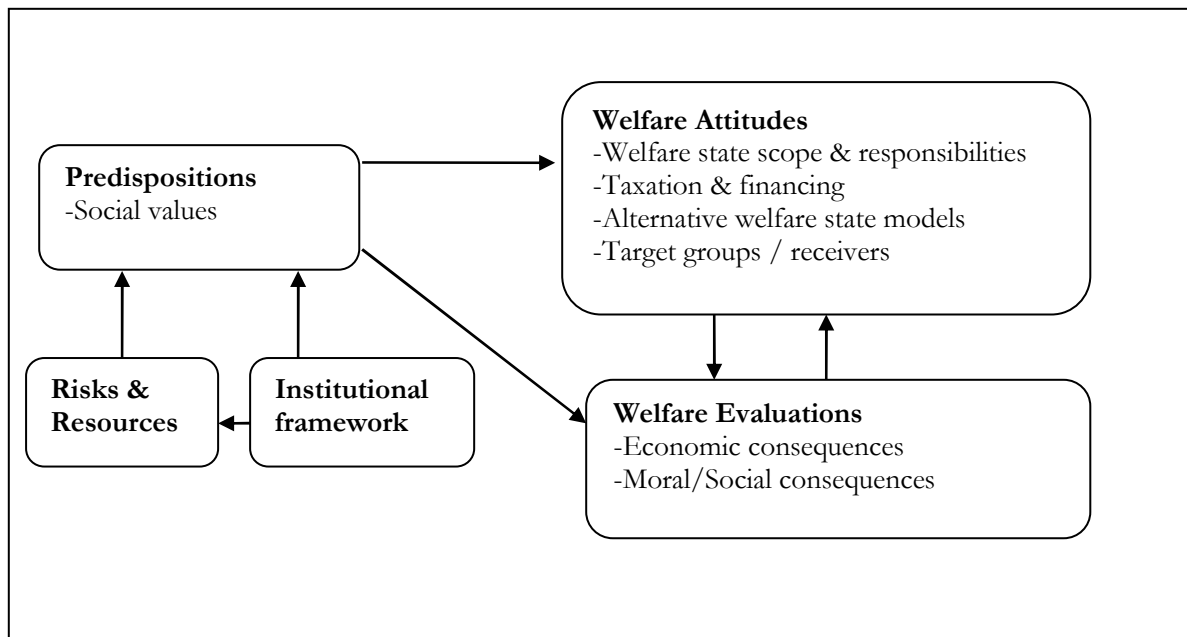
Our module is allowed to include 50 items, in addition to the ESS core questionnaire. A first major challenge is therefore to select the “right” items. In order to organise the items used in the module, we have developed a model of welfare attitudes which defines the main attitudinal dimensions and the expected (causal) relationships between them. Figure 1 presents a simplified version of the model on which our module is based. We will now briefly outline the different components of the model and give examples of items used to assess the corresponding dimensions.

Our conceptual framework takes as its starting point the **risks and resources** that different individuals and social groups are exposed to and endowed with as a function of their position in society. As a subjective measure of social class and of perceived vulnerability, risk perception is expected to be a major factor shaping predispositions and attitudes towards welfare policies. Perceived economic risk should on the one hand increase support for collective responsibility and comprehensive welfare policies, but may on the other hand also give rise to exclusionary attitudes restricting welfare provision to certain categories of citizens. This dimension of perceived (economic) risk is measured with items such as:

Looking ahead over the next three years, how likely do you think it is that ...

- you will be unemployed and looking for work for at least a month?
- you have to restrict your working hours because you have to take care of family members or relatives?
- you will have to go some time without having enough money to cover your household's necessities?

**Figure 1:** Simplified conceptual framework of the ESS 4 Welfare module



Important **institutional variations** in terms of national welfare policy regimes are found between nation states. The institutions expected to strongly shape welfare opinions are those related to the programmatic structure of the welfare state, and those related to the connection of work, families and welfare policies. The institutional framework is expected not only to shape welfare attitudes (Jaeger, 2006; Larsen, 2006), but also perceived risks as well as “predispositions” of welfare attitudes, in particular social values. Analyses focusing on the impact of institutions will need to carefully select and construct national indicators of welfare principles, policies and regimes.

**Social values** (along with other predispositions not presented here) are hypothesised to act as mediators from risks/resources and institutional factors to attitudes to welfare policies. Social values expected to play a major role in shaping welfare attitudes are egalitarianism, traditionalism and authoritarianism.

**Egalitarianism** captures attitudes towards inequality and redistribution and a general egalitarian orientation. Items include:

- *For a society to be just, differences in the living conditions of people should be small*
- *Large inequalities in people's incomes are fine, since it means that talents and efforts of people are rewarded*

**Traditionalism** captures attitudes towards morality and traditional gender roles. Items include:

- *A woman should be prepared to cut down on her paid work for the sake of her family*
- *Men should take as much responsibility as women for the home and children*

**Authoritarianism** captures attitudes towards authority and conformity. Items include:

- *Schools should teach children to obey authority*
- *People who break the law should be given longer sentences*

The module includes a broad set of attitudes towards welfare policies of which we will only present a very partial view. The first one is attitudes to **welfare state scope and responsibilities**. Such attitudes refer to the measures citizens think that the state and public authorities should enact in order to redistribute resources and safe-guard against risks. The central question citizens need to answer in this respect concerns the line to be drawn between public and private responsibilities.

*To what extent do you think that the government should have the following responsibilities:*

- *to ensure a job for everyone who wants one*
- *to ensure adequate health care for the sick*

Questions about **financing** of welfare policies refer to conceptions of collective responsibility of social problems, and are assessed with items such as :

*Which of these three options, [...], would you be most in favour of:*

1. *Working persons with higher earnings should pay a higher proportion of their earnings in tax than working people with lower earnings*
2. *All working persons should pay the same proportion of their earnings in tax*
3. *All working persons should pay exactly the same amount of money in tax*

Attitudes towards different **models of welfare policies** (e.g., universal vs. means-tested policies, income-related vs. flat-rate policies) reveal everyday conceptions of distributive justice such as equity, equality and need (Aalberg, 2003).

*Which of the statements on this card, [...], do you agree with most ?*

1. *People who have had higher incomes throughout their working lives should get a higher amount of state pension (because they have paid more in taxes and/or social contributions)*
2. *High and low earners should get exactly the same amount of state pension*
3. *People who have had lower incomes throughout their working lives should get a higher amount of state pension (because they are likely to be in greater need)*

A final aspect deals with attitudes towards the target groups and receivers of welfare policies. Prior research has extensively shown that **attitudes towards beneficiaries** are important driving forces behind support or opposition to welfare policies (Gilens, 1999; Staerklé et al, 2007). To the extent that welfare recipients are perceived as undeserving and untrustworthy, their claims and rights are likely to be considered illegitimate and abusive (Van Oorschot, 2006). Items include:

- *Most unemployed people do not really try to find a job*
- *Many of those receiving social assistance are not really poor*

A second set of welfare opinions concerns **evaluations of the welfare state** which assess perceived economic and social consequences of welfare state policies. Concerning the **evaluation of economic consequences**, items tap whether such policies stifle or promote economic growth, and whether they decrease or increase inequality in society:

- *If the system of public services and benefits in [country] was less comprehensive the economy would perform better*
- *The system of public services and benefits encourages people from other countries to come and live in [country]*

Questions on **moral and social consequences of welfare policies** refer to perceptions of social cohesion and social order in relation with the welfare state. To what extent are fundamental values underlying social organisation weakened or bolstered through various welfare policies? Such perceptions are particularly important with respect to reactions to deviance and marginality, and thus to an important category of welfare recipients.

- *“The system of public services and benefits makes people lazy”*
- *” The system of public services and benefits makes people less willing to care for each other”*

### *Some methodological challenges*

One of the great difficulties of this module concerns the comparability of measures across countries. Indeed, welfare regimes and welfare institutions differ massively between, say, Portugal, the UK, Sweden, Poland and the Ukraine, in terms of the scope of welfare coverage and service quality or in terms of public and private funding schemes. It is therefore of utmost importance to ensure that questions are understood in the same way across different national contexts, in particular concerning welfare institutions and policies. The notion of *Social security system*, for example, has very different meanings across countries, as does *Welfare state* itself, *Health care system* or *unemployment benefit*. These issues need to be thoroughly discussed with the national coordinators who will make sure that questions are formulated appropriately in their respective national contexts.

Related to the comparability of measures is the difficulty of translating some of our concepts. In many cases, citizens know “their” welfare institutions by idiosyncratic national names rather than by abstract, welfare theory-based names. Here too, national coordinators play an important role in deciding on the right terminology to use.

Other methodological issues are those which apply, to varying degrees, to any survey. Items must be formulated in an unambiguous and straightforward manner such that they can be understood by anyone. This aspect is crucial in light of the extremely large and varied sample which will answer these questions. Moreover, in order to avoid survey filters, items are formulated in a way which should make them relevant to almost anyone. We also try to refer as much as possible to everyday experience and use everyday language, while avoiding technical, expert or abstract terms. Items which refer to financial details (which are also difficult to compare across countries) or which require abstract thinking and calculation (e.g., proportionality thinking) are also avoided.

Items also need to be clear with respect to dilemmas which characterise many welfare policies: it is for example “easy” to agree that a given allowance or benefit should be increased, but once tax increase is in the equation, agreement rates drop drastically. Finally, social desirability also needs to be considered in item formulations, as it is usually more desirable to appear generous and open-minded rather than selfish and intolerant.

### **III. PROSPECTS**

To conclude, we will point out some prospects concerning the use of the welfare module data, planned to be made public in September 2009. The ESS welfare module provides the most comprehensive dataset on welfare attitudes ever used in a large scale international survey. Given that welfare issues are of concern for many scientific disciplines, including sociology, political science, social psychology and economics, it is a safe bet to consider that the data will be very extensively analysed. The data open up opportunities for unprecedented comparative analyses which will inform



researchers about the interplay between structures, institutions and opinions; they provide a new field of interdisciplinary research on topics such as risk, social justice, political legitimacy and governance.

Most of the comparative research using these data will make use of national indicators, especially concerning types of welfare regimes, economic indicators of inequality, relative and absolute poverty, class structure, etc. In conjunction with the ESS data, such indicators will allow, at the most general level, to study the relationship between aggregate level attitudes on the one hand and structures and institutions on the other.

Using mainly multilevel methods, research focusing on this relationship can extend and deepen prior research, for example on the impact of welfare cutbacks across different countries on marginalisation and alienation (Oskarson, 2007), on the relationship between welfare attitudes and individual-level prejudice, racism and sexism across different national contexts (Gilens, 1999; van Oorschot, 2006), on the relationship between social and cultural diversity and welfare legitimacy (Alesina & Glaeser, 2004; Hjerm, 2007), on the correspondence between public opinion on welfare and welfare regime, reform and retrenchment (Jaeger, 2006; Larsen, 2006), on different conceptions of social justice across nations (Aalberg, 2003; Mau, 2003), or on gender dynamics in welfare attitudes (Hobson, 2000). Other questions concern the consequences of satisfaction and dissatisfaction with welfare services on support for welfare policies (Kumlin, 2007), the underpinnings of class structure and conflict and their consequences for welfare attitudes across different types of welfare regimes (Svallfors, 2006; Edlund, 2007), effects of employment and unemployment policies on welfare attitudes (Goul Andersen, Clasen, van Oorschot & Halvorsen, 2002), social psychological foundations of different models of social order and institutional legitimacy (Staerklé et al., 2007), or detailed analyses and comparisons of expectations, needs and judgements of citizens concerning the welfare services and institutions of their country (Svallfors, 2003).

Possible future replications of the module will allow further possibilities for analyses of the dynamics of public opinion and of the causal relation between institutional change and changes in attitudes, values and perceptions.

These examples clearly demonstrate that this module is not only of interest to academics and researchers, but that it has also strong policy relevance, in particular with respect to public attitudes towards welfare change and welfare reform, a topic that will not disappear from national political agendas any time soon.

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