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Introduction

Comparative Perspectives on Poverty and Inequality: Japan and the United Kingdom

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Poverty and inequality appear to be intractable features of rich industrialised nations. It is a great paradox that despite rising prosperity in most advanced industrialised countries over the last two or three decades, poverty and inequality have remained stubbornly high and have even increased in the majority of rich countries (OECD, 2008, 2011). The United Kingdom and Japan are no exceptions to these trends. Despite having markedly different historical trajectories, there is evidence that the two societies are converging on the issue of these pressing social problems.

Rising levels of poverty and inequality in the UK began to emerge from the late 1970s and 1980s (Townsend, 1979; Mack and Lansley, 1985), with child poverty rates reaching an embarrassing peak in the mid-1990s (UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2000). Despite pronouncements by some about the possibilities of capitalism eradicating poverty and inequality, these depressing social phenomena are better understood as reflecting the natural by-products of the UK's neo-liberal economic trajectory (Pantazis and Gordon, 2000). New Labour's explicit intention to tackle the legacy of poverty and inequality inherited from their Conservative predecessors produced a respite from these trends, with rates of poverty and income inequality falling faster than in other OECD countries at the start of the new century, although both still remained unacceptably high (OECD, 2008). However, since the recession there has been a marked deterioration in absolute living standards: 'average incomes have fallen by near-record amounts . . . [and] the poor have undoubtedly been getting worse off in absolute terms, on average' (Institute of Fiscal Studies, 2012: 1).

Post-war economic success, combined with high levels of equitable income distribution, contributed to Japan's historically low rates of poverty and inequality, leading to a long-held perception of Japan as egalitarian and even classless (Abe, 2010). However, the implosion of the Japanese economic bubble in the 1990s and the economy's continuing sluggish performance led to a sharp reversal of its traditionally low rates of poverty and inequality (Iwata and Nishizawa, 2008). The displacement of corporatism, characterised by high levels of employment and the provision of welfare and legal protections for workers, by neo-liberalism, resulted in the growing phenomenon of the 'working-poor' as the proportion of non-regular (i.e. temporary) workers rose (Miura, 2012). Despite the increasing visibility of poverty and inequality (most notably the construction of blue tents by homeless men in the subways and parks of Japanese cities), they remained low priorities. Japan's 'rediscovery' of poverty, the acceptance of poverty

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in its relative manifestations, was a slow process and followed a dramatic display of civil society action between 31 December 2008 and 5 January 2009. A coalition of non-governmental groups, unions and lawyers led by activitist Makoto Yuasa set up the 'Temp Worker's New Year Village' (Toshikoshi Haken Mura) in Hibiya Park, directly opposite the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare in Tokyo. The village, providing food and shelter to 500 villagers, sent a stark message to Japanese politicians that action needed to be taken. The Ministry opened its auditorium on 2 January to cope with the excess numbers of people entering the village and the government promised to 'seriously address the issue'. The increasing concern about inequality and poverty was one of the reasons that the public voted overwhelmingly for the Democratic Party in the national election in September 2009, ending the fifty year reign of the conservative Liberal Democratic Party. It is noteworthy that Japan's new government looked to New Labour's third way agenda for inspiration on how these issues could be addressed.

This themed section provides a closer inspection of the phenomena of poverty and inequality in these two rich industrialised societies from a comparative perspective. Cross-national comparisons are of great importance for enriching and extending our understandings, yet comparative research on Japan and the UK is still quite rare, despite the growing interest in drawing comparisons between these two countries (see Izuhara, 2005). The collection was inspired by an ESRC/JSPS sponsored seminar event, held in 2012 in Japan, on 'The State-of-the-Art Measurement of Poverty and Social Exclusion: A Comparison of UK and Japan', co-organised with Dr Abe from the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research (NIPSSR) in Tokyo.[1] Each of the six articles appearing as part of this themed section is co-authored by UK and Japanese experts, allowing for a detailed comparative analysis of the issues. Between them, the six articles address four core themes: (1) concepts and definitions, (2) issues of measurement, (3) relational experiences, (4) policy discourses and responses.

Concepts and definitions

Exploring similarities and differences in how poverty is understood in the two societies is a key focus for the themed section. Definitional debates about poverty have traditionally focused on the distinction between absolute and relative notions. The themed section presents evidence on how ordinary people (as opposed to experts) view poverty. From a consensual poverty perspective, the two articles by Abe and Pantazis and Davis *et al*. demonstrate that both societies support a minimum standard of living which is rooted in relative conceptualisations of poverty, although the former contributors found that the Japanese public tends to have a more stringent interpretation of what counts as a minimum standard of living, especially regarding children's items. Nevertheless, Abe and Pantazis also argue that Japan's historically higher levels of equality mean that differences between income groups are less pronounced. This suggests that the presence of high levels of egalitarianism (in a society) may serve to foster a more cohesive view of what a minimum standard of living should encompass.

Issues of measurement

The apparent rise in levels of inequality in Japan over the last two decades (especially as measured by the Gini co-efficient) has proved a controversial matter since the publication

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of conflicting reports, for example, recent OECD reports (2008, 2011) and Wilkinson and Pickett's *The Spirit Level* (2009). Ballas *et al*. re-visit debates stimulated by Wilkinson and Picket to examine whether Japan remains an exemplar of an equal society, in contrast to the UK which is characterised as having higher levels of inequality and social discord. Their analysis, following a comprehensive review of data sources and methods, puts Japan in the 'top three most equal countries, with only Finland and Norway being slightly more equal'. On this basis, they conclude that their study confirms the arguments made by Wilkinson and Pickett and challenges that of other analyses, including those undertaken by the OECD, which depict Japan as increasingly unequal.

The themed section also gives consideration to comparative perspectives on the measurement of poverty. The UK has been at the forefront of state-of-the-art-knowledge and practice concerning poverty measurement, whereas Japan has had a shorter history and has often sought to apply UK advances. Taking consensual approaches developed in the UK (Mack and Lansley's 'perceived deprivation' approach and the 'minimum income' approach produced by Loughborough University), the respective articles by Abe and Pantazis and Davis *et al*. apply these methodologies to Japan, and argue for their importance in developing cross-national research on poverty. Moreover, from their application of consensual methods it may be possible to develop internationally agreed standards concerning life's necessities (Abe and Pantazis).

Relational experiences

One of the impacts of the dominance of quantitative approaches in poverty research is the emphasis given to material experiences of poverty and deprivation. This has often been at the expense of relational aspects, which are perhaps better investigated through the use of qualitative methods. In addressing this shortcoming, Sutton *et al*. pay specific attention to the relational features of poverty. Their central argument is that shame and stigma are central characteristics of poverty in capitalist societies, even when examining diverse countries such as the UK and Japan. Through their interrogation of the qualitative literature on the subject, they elicit how shame and stigma overlap, and also how they co-vary between the two societies. In doing so, they draw attention to how differing social organisations (collectivist versus individualist) may account for some of the disparities found. The authors write, for example, that in Japan the 'heightened social pressures to conform and collaborate in collectivist cultures may exacerbate feelings of shame', although it is also the case that 'the sense of social solidarity typically … may serve to mitigate the most corrosive psycho-social impacts of poverty'.

Policy and discourses responses

Despite differing 'welfare regimes' (the UK reflecting a mix of universalism and economic liberalism and Japan combining corporate welfare with an increasing emphasis on liberalism), tackling poverty and inequality remain important challenges for governments. Acknowledging the unacceptable levels of child poverty and recognising its deleterious effects, governments in both countries have in recent years prioritised addressing child poverty, although in Japan policies to support families are also connected to the desire to halt the fertility crisis. In their article, Bradshaw and Tokoro examine different family support packages available in the UK and Japan. They argue that the recent debacle over

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universal child benefit in both countries has served to undermine the crucial support needed by families, particularly in the UK where austerity has impacted most on children and their parents. Interestingly the removal of universal child benefit coincided with increased attention in political and public discussions on the role of parents in preventing and protecting children from poverty. Taking food and education as case studies, Dermott and Yamashita explicate how the recent promotion of 'good' parenting in both countries requires parents to be in possession of expert skills which can be developed with the help of government. But this emphasis often silences the issue of material resources which may facilitate good parenting, they argue; the deficit in parenting is understood as lacking the right information or advice rather than a shortage of funds. In the UK, this is consistent with a government message which emphasises activities which are largely free, whereas in Japan the issue of affordability is often downplayed even when parental involvement necessarily involves expenditure, for example paying for Juku. This may be the result of Japan's unwillingness to recognise the problem of poverty until recently.

Collectively, the articles in this themed section make an important contribution to comparative perspectives on poverty and inequality in rich nations. With the impacts of the economic recession still being felt, the problems of poverty and inequality loom large. It is hoped that this collection of articles will inspire further comparative research so that academic knowledge and expertise can be shared and the problems of poverty and inequality closer to being tackled.

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Note

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