

Interview

Lifetime achievers:

Alan Walker



Alan Walker is Professor of Social Policy and Social Gerontology at the University of Sheffield and Director of the New Dynamics of Ageing Programme. His recent major publications included Understanding Quality of Life in Old Age (2006) and East Asian Welfare Regimes in Transition with CK Wong (2005), according to his online academic profile. Walker's research interests span social analysis, social policy and social planning and he is a specialist in social gerontology; chairing the European Foundation on Social Quality and directing the New Dynamics of Ageing Research Programme, which is funded by five research councils.

"I went to university to take a degree in economics, but the common first year at the University of Essex introduced me to sociology and social policy which, I soon realised, were much more interesting," said Professor Alan

Walker. "My voluntary work at school with older and disabled people was followed by membership of the local Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) branch in Colchester which ran a welfare rights stall every Saturday in the town centre. This emphasised both the failures and the potential of social policy [to me]." He was taught by both Adrian Sinfield and Peter Townsend at university, which "helped to raise the profile of social policy in my thinking."

Like Jonathan Bradshaw above, Alan Walker attributes to Townsend the greatest single influence on his approach to social policy. "To my mind, a giant of global social policy and sociology," said Walker. "He offered me my first job in social policy, inspired me with regard to the necessity of a sociological perspective and profoundly influenced my approach to the subject." Adrian Sinfield, Richard Titmuss, Barbara Wootton, R H Tawney and Mike Miller were other influential names, according to the Sheffield University professor. "It is a depressing commentary on contemporary social policy that these authors are so little read: several PhDs that I examined recently contained only a handful of pre-1990 references!"

The most essential text for all students of social policy is either Titmuss, Commitment to Welfare or the same author's Essays on the Welfare State, according to Professor Walker. "It's a tough one because the range of social policy is so wide and no single text should strive to cover it all, even as an undergraduate primer." This emphasis on the broad reach of social policy was also apparent in Walker's views about the discipline's major hurdles. "The main challenge to the discipline is to break out of its rather introspective, instrumental and sometimes parochial mind-set," he said. "Where is the commitment to welfare and social justice that was the essence of social policy when I first read the subject?"

"As Titmuss reminded us social policy, above all disciplines, has a duty to make explicit its values. Too often, however, critiques of inequality are muted, as if social analysis can be detached from the values underlying it. This is

one of the reasons why some colleagues and I developed the idea of social quality, to provide a rationale for social policy and an understanding of the special nature of the adjective 'social'." Walker described a recent tendency for disciplinary identity to take a back seat to the core values of delivering social justice and social quality, leading to an "instrumental positivist orientation". "To persuade students to study the subject, we must re-emphasise its core commitment to welfare, its necessity in the face of global and local inequalities, its huge relevance to many facets of

"The main challenge to the discipline is to break out of its rather introspective, instrumental and sometimes parochial mind-set. Where is the commitment to welfare and social justice that was the essence of social policy when I first read the subject?"



contemporary societies and the exciting nature of much of its research agenda. In practice, researchers working in this field have provided the evidence that has contributed to social quality and social progress, and we need to make sure that this work is more widely known," Walker said.

The significance of ageing is one factor which the social policy community could understand better, Walker added, continuing his thoughts about issues within the discipline. "My position as the only chair-holder (anywhere) in social policy and social gerontology causes me to question seriously whether social policy, as a discipline, understands the significance of ageing. Of course all general texts on social policy have their chapters on 'older people' alongside children and other 'clients' of the welfare services - I've written a few of them - but ageing is something else and, like gender and race, it pervades all levels of society and profoundly influences social inclusion, well-being and quality of life. Unless we understand ageing we cannot propose adequate policies to respond to the current global demographic revolution. The New Dynamics of Ageing research programme is intend to advance this understanding."

While there are challenges of core values and broadening

understanding to be met within the field, the external challenges centre around neo-liberalism, according to Professor Walker. "It [the major challenge to welfare systems today] is undoubtedly the neo-liberal hegemony that has the power to crush welfare systems, regardless of their previous 'dependent' paths," he said. "In the name of 'modernisation', all the gains that have been made by progressive social policy can be reversed and markets or quasi-markets put in their place.

Everywhere that neo-liberalism is dominant, inequalities increase and residualised public services become poor quality services for the poor. Again, social policy should occupy the vanguard in the progressive response to neo-liberalism but, while some have tried to take this role, the general voice is muted."

"To persuade students to study the subject, we must re-emphasise its core commitment to welfare, its necessity in the face of global and local inequalities, its huge relevance to many facets of contemporary societies and the exciting nature of much of its research agenda."

In contrast to Bradshaw, Alan Walker was less optimistic about the resilience of welfare systems today. He referred to the points raised above, and once again spoke of the threat of neo-liberalism. "There is a danger that neo-liberalism's proslytisation of market supremacy will be accepted by younger generations for whom the 'social' has no resonance," he warned. "Of course there are countervailing forces, both positive and negative, that might assist in the reinvention of the social, but what is lacking is a concerted movement. In the UK it looks like a steady breaking-up of the welfare state in the guise of 'modernisation'."