

# Conceptual Controversies:

## Comparing the quality of work and welfare for men and women across societies

**Abstract:** This paper critically examines a range of typologies used in comparative employment and welfare state research. The approaches examined include the societal effect, varieties of capitalism, welfare state regimes and benchmarking approaches, and their feminist critiques. The article concludes by assessing the critical merits and implicit assumptions of using such typologies for comparative research on the quality of work and welfare for men and women.

### Introduction

This paper sets out to critically examine a number of different analytical frameworks that have been used to examine changing relations in the worlds of work and welfare. It seeks to highlight the intellectual structure underlying the authors' analysis of the impact of labor market restructuring, institutional adjustment and welfare state reform from a cross-national comparative perspective. Here I am interested in examining the extent to which such approaches could be applied to examining and comparing the quality of work for men and women between countries. It has become increasingly common for comparative research to rely on typologies as a means of clustering countries for the purpose of comparison. Here I distinguish between four main types of approach.<sup>1</sup> First I examine an approach that uses a holistic analysis emphasising the *distinctive societal features* of a particular employment system. A second approach compares and contrasts the organisation and performance of two *ideal types*. A third approach identifies *two main axes of variation* with a strong or weak, high or low, distribution, which can allow them to generate four or more categories. A fourth approach *clusters attributes and statistical scores* to generate compatible and comparable groups. Although these approaches were not specifically developed to examine and compare the quality of work and welfare in different countries, my intention is first to illustrate the different analytical frameworks, how each has been applied to such comparisons, the strengths and weaknesses of each approach and their implications for examining gender differences.

### 1. Distinctive societal features and a holistic approach

The societal effect approach, developed by Maurice et al. (1982), emphasises the distinctiveness of a given employment system, challenging the established universal approaches at the time of Marxism and Industrialism. One of the key characteristics of the societal effect is its holistic approach. This means that isolated institutions cannot be compared term for term between countries. Instead they need to be located within a distinctive societal configuration. Maurice, Sellier and Silvestre initially examined the relationship between the educational system, the structure of business, and the sphere of industrial relations in France and Germany. For them an actors' behavior takes place within the context of particular institutions in a given society, institutions that also modify the behavior of these actors. This approach situates the particular features of a given domain in a broader social and economic context. By focusing on particular 'domains' they argue they can move towards a broader general picture, "*the actors and domains enter into the construction of the general*

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<sup>1</sup> This categorisation has built on and adapted the distinctions made by Sainsbury (1996:9-14) on mainstream approaches to welfare state research.

*without losing any of their specificity*" (Maurice et al. 1986: 233). They argue that by putting the education system at the center of their analysis they can focus on the relations between skill attainment and the organization of workplace hierarchy. This approach allows them to make links between the organization of work at the micro level of the firm, and, national institutions at the macro level. The advantage of this approach for comparative research is to highlight the different types of constraints and opportunities facing a particular set of actors within these systems.

However, Kieffer and Marry (1996) have also pointed out the tendency, which Bouteiller et al. (1972: 180) acknowledged, that in the former West Germany women are more likely to have their qualifications devalued than in France. This is in sharp contrast to the male model of employment in each country. In France there is a greater polarization between low and high-qualified male employees, in contrast to a more integrated system found in Germany. In France there is also wider wage dispersion than in Germany. The reverse is true for women. French women, especially those towards the lower end of the skills scale, get a better return for their qualifications than German women (Kieffer and Marry 1996: 8). Wage dispersion amongst women employees is higher in the former W. Germany than in France (Bouteiller et al. 1972: 181-3). The strength of the bourgeois family model and the presence of children in the former W. Germany are also more likely to lead to discontinuous employment and a devaluation of their occupational status than in France, where continuous employment is more common (Kieffer and Marry 1996: 23; Daune-Richard 1998; Pfau-Effinger 1988). Rubery (1994: 340) further questions the dominance accorded to the educational system which may have less influence in other societies than is the case in France; (see also Marry 1993). Comparing women's employment within this framework also highlights the difference in the economic structure of the two countries: service sector employment and the agricultural sector, where a large number of women are employed, are more significant in France than in the former W. Germany. (These different gendered societal approaches are discussed in more detail in O'Reilly (2000) and Crompton (1999)).

However, the societal approach was effectively blind to the socialization institutions related to the sphere of social reproduction that could identify differences in the availability of female labor and the ideology of gender roles. It was also less successful at picking up on the effect of constraints and opportunities coming from the sphere of labor regulation and welfare provision. These socialization institutions have differentially shaped the characteristics of the available male and female labor force, and the quality of jobs available for them (Rubery 1988: 253). Proposals to gender the societal approach (O'Reilly 2000) argue for the inclusion of the sphere of social reproduction alongside the analysis of the societal organisation of production. But it also raises the question of whether or not it is possible to make term for term comparisons across countries. Marry (1993) suggests that this is possible. But when it comes to interpreting and explaining these cross-national differences the societal effect approach relies on situating them within the constellation of particular institutional developments. Rubery (1994: 340-1) argues further that the interdependency between the production, consumption and social reproduction system is crucial to understanding these different forms of organization and labor usage, and as a result their impact on the quality of life and employment available for men and women differently.

A more general critique of comparative approaches that give such emphasis to societal specificity's are that they are too reliant on a path dependency approach, i.e. that future developments and change are tightly constrained by pre-existing institutions and actors' policy agendas. Such approaches are often criticised for providing a poor account of change (this debate is discussed in more detail in Maurice and Sorge 2000). Many of the authors, naturally, refute these claims pointing to the presence of a dialectical approach in their work (Sorge 2000). Sainsbury's (1996) criticises such approaches because they make it difficult to apply findings to other countries, and at the same time they may neglect the fact that

particular features are also found in other systems. Other approaches rather than seeing countries as distinct, self-enclosed entities seek to group them into contrasting categories, for example by using ideal types.

## 2. Ideal Types

The use of ideal types has had a long tradition as an analytical tool in the history of sociological and economic research. Here I draw on examples of such an approach from political economy and studies of varieties of capitalism, as well as from welfare state research and their implications for attempting to examine the quality of employment for men and women.

Soskice and Hall (2001) in their book *Varieties of Capitalism* distinguish between *Coordinated market economies* (CMEs) and *Uncoordinated market economies* (UMEs). CMEs include two subtypes. These are the countries of Northern Europe, designated as *Industry Coordinated Economies*, in contrast to Japan and South Korea, which are *Group Coordinated Economies*. These types of economies encourage long-term financing relationships; cooperative industrial relations; serious initial vocational training and substantial cooperation on standard setting and technology between companies. These arrangements are embedded and sustained in the national framework by strong interlocking complementarities. This interdependence does not rule out change but it does limit the number of possible institutional constellations. Uncoordinated Market Economies provide the mirror image of CMEs, and are associated with *Liberal Market Economies* (LMEs). The financial systems impose relatively short-term horizons and high risk taking; labour markets are deregulated with weak forms of industrial relations; vocational education is also poor with more encouragement of general education; and there is a high level of inter-company competition limiting cooperation possibilities.

On one hand, the approach tells a succinct story largely about the success of high quality employment systems in Germany and Japan during the 1980s, in contrast to the poor quality systems experience of comparative failure in liberal economies such as the US and the UK. Most countries end up in the category of CMEs, with the exception of France. As Hancké and Soskice (1996) acknowledge, France, as in many other typologies, does not fit neatly into this categorisation, having its own form of state coordinated market economy. However, since the early 1990s fortunes have changed with Germany and Japan experiencing serious economic and employment difficulties in contrast to the apparently flourishing liberal economies. Are the implications of these changes that the liberal model symbolised as harbouring a high proportion of poor quality jobs triumphed over the better quality systems? Research on changing employment structures indicate that while a significant proportion of poor quality jobs are found in these liberal societies, there has also been a significant growth in high skilled high paid jobs, especially in the service sector into which women have made a number of inroads (Fagan et al. 2004). In order to explain the surprising turn from a virtuous circle into a vicious circle, the approach needs to go outside the scope of its own explanatory framework and rely more on differences in the use of macro economic fiscal and monetary policy.

One of the problems with the approach in associating CMEs with better quality jobs is its focus on 'core' workers in strong internal labour markets. There has been a significant neglect of 'auxiliary' labour arrangements, for example the use of temporary or part-time employment which is typically performed by 'non-standard workers' such as women, youth and older workers (Gottfried and O'Reilly 2000). Nevertheless, one of the overriding strengths of the approach in general was the concise and powerful use of concepts to sum up two very different approaches to political economy and the organisation and consequences of different types of capitalist systems of production.

The use of ideal types is also found in the welfare state research of Lewis and Ostner (1992) and Lewis (1992). They distinguish between countries with a strong, weak or modified male breadwinner model. They compare, for example, whether benefit entitlements are paid directly to mothers, or fathers; whether tax regimes are based on joint household incomes or are individualised. The core argument they develop from their European comparison is that female dependency on a male breadwinner is stronger in countries that expect women to participate more in unpaid caring work. Lewis and Ostner's research suggest that both conservative corporatist countries, like Germany, and liberal welfare states, like the UK and Ireland, share a comparable strong breadwinner model. This encourages the withdrawal of mothers from the labour market. A weak breadwinner model, supporting dual income families, is found in social democratic Scandinavian countries. Finally, a modified breadwinner model is found in France where a more mixed range of incentives exists for women to either work full-time, or withdraw.

One of the advantages of this male breadwinner typology is that it draws attention to the different policy assumptions about the type of legitimate family models in different societies and how these affect women's employment and motherhood decisions (see also Pfau-Effinger 1998, Daune-Richard 1998). More significantly it also gives an indication, in terms of social policy support and potential collective bargaining norms, of how deeply rooted the ideal of a 'family wage' is in a given society.

Nevertheless, some of the critiques of this approach have argued that the categories encompass very heterogeneous groups of countries. The countries grouped under the category 'strong' breadwinner regimes, for example, includes the former West Germany, the UK, Ireland and the Netherlands all of which have very different levels of female labour activity (Fagan et al. 1998). The policy assumptions in themselves are not sufficient to account for the different patterns of labour force participation and the quality of employment, for example, within the same cluster. Duncan (1995) questions how or why the state arrived at a strong or modified breadwinner model; for him gender inequality is more than the sum of the principles behind state policies towards families and paid work.<sup>2</sup> The focus is on women, rather than on gender relations, i.e. the relations between men and women. O'Conner et al. (1999: 22) argue that there is an inadequate theorization of '*the political interests of gender and associated political conflicts*'. It implies that women's interests are less well served by policies supporting this traditional arrangement. They also argue that while this approach highlights the assumptions of policy makers it is less concerned with the outcomes, for example in relation to single mothers. In later work, Lewis et al. (1997) acknowledge that the outcomes are more varied even if the assumptions are similar. This is an important point, which is particularly well illustrated by a comparison of Germany and France: both countries have a household taxation system, supporting maternal withdrawal, but participation rates in France are significantly higher and on a full-time basis (Dingeldey 1999). Clearly looking at policy assumptions, in this case around institutions supporting the family wage, on their own is insufficient, and needs to be complemented by developments in other spheres, outside welfare regulation. For example, O'Conner et al. (1999) argue that the analysis of welfare states needs to be related more directly to other forms of income maintenance and the regulation of reproduction, as well as labour markets developments.

Although dualist ideal type approaches have had a considerable popularity in the thinking and empirical application to comparative employment and welfare state studies, they also entail some significant problems. First, ideal type comparisons are usually conceived of as polar opposites. This makes it difficult to deal with countries that are in between these extremes. Are these ideal types to be treated as completely distinct, or as two extreme poles

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<sup>2</sup> He argues that a 'differentiated conception of patriarchy' is required, combined with a concept of gender contracts to see how this operated. See also O'Reilly (1996) for some discussion of the problems with patriarchy – and a review of these debates. Alternative approaches suggested that more attention should be given to the processes and conditions under which choices are made about managing employment and caring.

on a continuum? If the latter is true, how should other countries that find themselves between these poles be allocated and move, if at all, along this continuum? Second, the characteristics of an ideal type can oversimplify the diversity of elements, and contradictory policies, that lie hidden, or ignored, behind the type category of a given employment regime or welfare state. To overcome some of these limitations we now turn to examine approaches which have sought to go beyond this dichotomous approach by building on a two dimensional approach to generate a larger number of types.

### 3. Building on two-dimensional comparisons

A more complex, historically grounded categorisation of the distinctions between corporatist and more voluntaristic wage setting systems has been provided by Colin Crouch (1993). The three key concepts he uses to distinguish between different kinds of organisational politics are *contestation*, *pluralism* and *corporatism*. He then uses two main axes to generate a fourfold classification of industrial relations systems in Europe. The first axis is the strength, or weakness, of organised labour; the second is the degree of articulation between capital and labour. He uses these to construct a matrix allowing him to allocate countries to one of the four categories. First, the Scandinavian countries, and to a lesser extent Austria, have a long tradition of high levels of union power and employer-union articulation. This he labels *neo-corporatism with strong labour*. Germany and the Netherlands have had comparatively weaker labour organization but have been able to incorporate them into articulated employer-union relations: *neo-corporatism with weak labour*. In contrast, in the UK and Ireland high union power has coincided with weaker union-employer articulation, so that their power has not been translated into political strength; this variety of industrial relations system he labels *pluralistic bargaining* or *unstable contestation* because it has at times had destabilizing effects. In France, and to a lesser degree in Spain, unions are weak, as is employer-union articulation. This he calls *pluralistic bargaining* or *stable contestation*.<sup>3</sup>

Ebbinghaus (1998: 13-14) discusses these categories from Crouch in terms of Scandinavian corporatism, Continental social partnership, Anglo-Saxon voluntarism and finally Roman polarization; labels which potentially visualise the countries concerned more immediately. Crouch's categorisation is supported by a rich and stimulating comparative analysis tracing the historical characteristics of existing systems. He is also able to use it as an analytical grid to bring in the differential impact of the modernisation processes, political institutions and traditional 'religious' organisation on these different industrial relations systems in Europe.

Nevertheless, like much of the research in industrial sociology in the latter half of the twentieth century the focus of attention has been on 'traditional' industrial sectors, for good reason. In part, industrial workers, even if they did not account for the majority of workers in any given society over the past century, were often politically the most visible. Even so, the advantages of some corporatist systems might look very different if they were to discuss the conditions under which the majority of women are employed (see Gottfried and O'Reilly 2000). Rubery and Fagan (1995) have suggested a way in which a gender dimension could be introduced into this type of industrial relations research which would allow us to distinguish between the quality of employment available to men and women in these societies. They argue that indicators taking account of the gender wage gap and the existence of minimum wage legislation, occupational segregation, equality legislation, the organisation of consumption and regulation of the social sphere of reproduction would allow us to provide a fuller picture of the differentiated quality of employment for different groups of workers. However, by bringing in more variables, or trying simultaneously to take account of these

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<sup>3</sup> However, Spain has moved from authoritarian corporatism to a resemblance of unstable pluralistic bargaining as seen in the UK

aspects makes it more difficult to reduce these different experiences to scores on two dimensions.

Some attempt to bridge this gap between industrial relations and welfare state research typologies can be found in the work of Ebbinghaus (1998). He argues that while the impact of organised interests on the expansion of the welfare state has been well documented, there has been a relative neglect of how social policy regimes have impacted upon employment relations and the role of the social partners in shaping social and labour policy. He sets out to bridge the gap and examine the linkages between the typologies generated from comparative *welfare state and labour relations*' research. He combines these two typologies with a comparison of the empirical characteristics of *employment regimes* in a number of European countries. This leads him to produce four categories.

The first, a *Work Society Model*, is a combination of a social democratic welfare state and Nordic neo-corporatist labour relations. Such societies as Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Finland, share similar characteristics of high levels of employment and female labour market participation, producing a low gender gap.<sup>4</sup> There is a medium to high use of part-time employment, a large public sector and a pattern of early entry into and late exit from the labour market. The second type he calls the *Breadwinner Model*, which includes Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, and to a lesser extent Belgium and Switzerland. These countries represent a combination of Christian democratic welfare states and Continental social partnership. They have a medium level of male/female employment rate, there is some non-wage employment, there is an increasing use of part-time work, a low-medium public sector, and early labour market entries and exits. The third group, the *Free Market Model*, has a high level of general employment, a narrowing gender gap, high levels of part-time work, an increasingly privatised public sector, early labour market entry and a partial, private, early retirement arrangements. Britain and Ireland are the two countries that symbolise this model. The fourth type, the *Family Subsidiarity Model*, is found in Italy, Spain, and to a lesser extent, Portugal and France. This combines a Catholic residual welfare state with Roman polarized labour relations. There is a medium level of overall employment, a high level on non-wage employment, a low-medium gender gap, a low use of part-time employment, a significant level of public sector activity, a high level of youth unemployment and highly gendered working life trajectories. However, some of the countries in these categories sit together uneasily, for example, Portugal and Spain have very different patterns of female employment (Ruivo et al. 1998). The same is also true, at a regional level, for countries like Austria and the unified Germany (Duncan 1995) as well as for Italy and Spain.

Ebbinghaus' aim is to identify the elective affinities (*Wahlverwandtschaften*) between systems of labour relations and the welfare state in these different countries. His argument is that employment regimes provide a 'missing link' or interaction (*Wechselwirkungen*) between these different regime typologies. Following a Weberian perspective he seeks to examine the historical development of the more or less tight coupling of these institutions from pluralist industrial relations and welfare states. He argues that there are three general problems of institutional adaption that are faced by all countries. First, common global challenges generate specific problems in each country that are a product of the 'national configuration' between the welfare state and the system of industrial relations, which echos some of the concerns found in the societal approach. These institutions may find they are more, or less able to adapt to the changes required. Second, there is no one best way; national responses require tailor-made specific solutions. Even if countries appear to be following similar paths, they have different starting positions. Third, '*while loosely coupled systems allow a considerable degree of systemic adaption, these may be uncoordinated and contradictory, thus leading to incompatibilities and strains between them.*' (p.17) Changes occur at different levels in

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<sup>4</sup> The gender gap he measures in terms of male/female employment ratios (p. 22)

relatively unconnected spheres. Ebbinghaus' approach, while on one hand appearing to provide a synthesised version of earlier typologies, also seeks to inject an element of friction within the existing 'national configurations' permitting some leverage for change and reform of the institutions within. It also allows us to differentiate between the effects of these changes on different groups. He argues, for example that one can identify, on one hand, a decentralization of collective bargaining, while, on the other hand, an increasing centralized intervention in social security systems. It is the strain created by both the nature of coupling of institutions and the interaction between them that can generate catalysts for change which impacts on the outcomes in terms of the quality of employment available in these societies.

However, despite claims that this approach can provide a more dynamic analysis, countries once allocated to boxes do tend to remain there, as an almost self-fulfilling prophecy. Measures generated along two axes in terms of strength and weakness may be too simplistic to capture the changing nature of relationships both in qualitative and quantitative terms, for example in interpreting the gender gap. Ebbinghaus is aware of this himself in his critique of Esping-Andersen's aggregate quantitative measure of commodification and de-commodification as the central concept used to cluster countries into types.

#### **4. Clustering countries and benchmarking**

The work of Esping-Andersen has been one of the most influential typologies developed in recent years. It has also been the one to receive the most criticism, to which he has sought to respond at various levels. In his original work Esping-Andersen (1990) outlined three types of welfare state: conservative, liberal and social democratic. He has since adapted this typology to include southern European states (1999) and the potential distinctiveness or hybrid character of Japan and Asian welfare systems (1997). One of the claimed strengths of his approach has been to link welfare state provision closely to labour market outcomes, in particular for women. This means that liberal welfare states reliant on the market are more likely to create polarised employment opportunities for women in the private sector, whereas in Social Democratic regimes jobs for women are more likely to be found in the public sector. Conservative welfare states tend to encourage female withdrawal from employment and provide unpaid domestic services within the confines of the home. Southern European welfare states are characterised by the role of the family replacing provision against risks normally accounted for by the state in other societies

Critics and adaptations of his approach have been numerous (see for example Duncan 1995 for a short review of these; Fagan and O'Reilly 1998). Here we will focus on two main criticisms: the difficulty of 'fit' and conceptualisation of gender relations in terms of outcomes. Duncan (1995) and Daly (1997) have argued that the categories tend towards a description of a few key countries, i.e. the US (liberal), Germany (conservative) and Sweden (social democratic). Other countries are then sorted into these categories that do not account for diversity within the clusters. This problem of 'fit' revolves around whether the clusters should be treated as ideal types and whether countries have to stay tightly within one category, or whether they can lie across several categories (see also Esping-Andersen 1997 on Japan where he makes more acknowledgement of this point). France, in particular, is a country that has one of the greatest difficulties of 'fitting' into most of these typologies. Finally cluster analysis does not allow us to differentiate sufficiently between countries found in similar categories. Nevertheless, more recent attempts to break open these clusters can be found for example in the work of O'Conner et al. (1999) who look at developments in liberal welfare regimes of Canada, Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom; and Ellingsaeter (1998) who compares Scandinavian welfare states. This research indicates

significant differentiation even within these categories, bringing into question the whole framework proposed by Esping-Andersen.

There have also been attempts to adapt his work, for example by Siaroff (1994) who uses indices of family welfare orientation, receipt of benefits and female work desirability to produce four categories: Protestant social democracy, Advanced Christian democracy, Protestant liberal welfare states, and Late female mobilisation. The first three correspond to the social democratic, conservative and liberal regimes, and the latter incorporates 'Latin Rim' countries, which also includes Ireland. Again the issue of fit is problematic: whereas in industrial relations research countries like Ireland have been more closely associated with British traditions, in this schema they find themselves on the Latin periphery. The Netherlands is another country that does not fit, straddled between a sometimes conservative and sometimes more social democratic model. Some of these problems are discussed in more detail in Anxo and O'Reilly (2000) and Fagan et al. (1998).

The work of Gornick et al. (1997) is a further attempt to break out of the Esping-Andersen regimes by empirically testing and comparing a subset of public family policies that affect maternal employment across 14 industrialized countries.<sup>5</sup> They look at 18 measures of public policy to construct composite indices of policy 'packages' including parental leave, childcare and the scheduling of public education. These are contrasted with levels of income assistance for families with children. They show that levels of child poverty tend to be lower where there are more opportunities for women to have continuous employment, for example in Sweden, Denmark and France. In contrast countries like the US where there are much higher levels of poverty among children is in part due to '*meager cash transfers combined with few supports for continuous maternal employment*' (p. 65). In their study they aggregate a range of policies affecting maternal employment while differentiating them from family policies more generally.

They distinguish between countries with the most developed package of policies combining job protection and wage replacement at the time of childbirth, extended leave and/or publicly subsidized child care. Such provisions clearly have an important impact on the quality of employment available to women in these countries. These conditions were found in Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France and Sweden, where women are more likely to have a continuous pattern of participation. But here the authors do not distinguish between part-time and full-time employment, the latter of which has been more common in France and Finland. Middle ranging countries included Germany and the Netherlands which provide '*moderately generous maternity-leave policies*' protecting employment, but with such limited care support systems that it is very difficult for women to take up employment again, and if they do it is more likely to be by working reduced hours. Amongst the final group of English-speaking countries government benefits were very limited. Gornick et al. argue that the observed M-pattern of female employment in some of these Anglo-Saxon countries can be explained by the lack of provision and children's age. For example once children are attending school it is easier for the mothers to return to paid employment.

By comparing the differences between provision for pre-school and school age children the rank ordering of countries changes. Countries with policies supporting early maternal employment usually continue to do so. But the position of the US and UK improves where '*Early school enrollments, long school days and years are consistent with the historical commitment to free public education in these countries.*' (Gornick et al. 1997: 65). The unintended consequence of this commitment effectively provides childcare, enabling mothers to enter or extend paid employment. This is particular clear in the French case where Republican goals to remove the privileges of the family, and use the education system to generate 'new citizens', led to the establishment of contemporary institutions facilitating

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<sup>5</sup> Although in more recent work they revert to the Esping-Andersen typology.



women's full-time employment for example through crèche provision and the systems of *écoles maternelle* (Tilly and Scott 1987; O'Reilly 1994; Daune-Richard 1998). Such features also pose some problems for the Breadwinner model used by Lewis and Ostner where they focus primarily on the policy assumptions. They give less attention to the unintended consequences of related institutions designed for other purposes.

Gornick et al. criticize Esping-Andersen's model for the lack of a systematic comparison of maternal employment in different welfare regimes. As with Esping-Andersen's methodology they collect data on a number of policy measures, using it to construct a composite indicator to allocate countries to types. However, they clearly indicate the sensitivity of the choice of measures. In this case measures affecting pre-school and school aged children produce different assessments of the facilities in Anglo-Saxon countries. A similar problem about the sensitivity of composite measures can be found in a number of benchmarking studies.

Benchmarking is an approach that was originally developed in the private industrial sector applied to product design and later work organisation. It sought to identify and establish standards of best practice and quality. This has, more recently, been adopted in socio-economic policy to assess the effectiveness and efficiency of government policy, in particular labour market and equal opportunities policies (Speckesser et al. 1998; Tronti 1998; Plantenga and Hansen 1999; Storrie and Bjurek 2000). The aim of such research is to identify the potential for policy improvement and intervention, which is quite different, for example, from the societal effect approach discussed earlier. However, defining performance indicators and the most appropriate methods of intervention to transfer 'best practice' is a controversial issue that also needs to take account of national specificities (Rubery 1999:9; Tronti 1998:41).

Given space limitations, I will only briefly refer to the results from the work of Plantenga and Hansen (1999). They are interested in examining and monitoring equal opportunities in fifteen European Union countries related to the goals of employment policy. They construct measures related first, to the distribution of paid and unpaid work,<sup>6</sup> and second, to the position of women in the labour market.<sup>7</sup> These measures seek to establish both quantitative and qualitative aspects of gender relations in terms of paid and unpaid work. These somewhat mechanically generated comparative scores are then situated along side a third set of factors which seek to give more account to broader societal factors, such as economic growth and employment, attitudes towards women's employment, the impact of the tax system, working-time regimes, childcare facilities and leave arrangements.

Plantenga and Hansen acknowledge that these measures can generate some significant problems for comparison. For example '*if equality between women and men is defined as the absence of gender gaps, then insight into absolute levels is lost.*' (p. 354). For example in 1997 the difference between Irish men and women in terms of unemployment may be low, but the overall rate of unemployment was high: 15.1% among men and 16% among women; by 2004 this figure has fallen substantially to rates of less than 4% for both men and women. In Austria unemployment rates for women were much higher than for men, but this was from a much lower overall level of 3.5% for men and 5.3% for women. It is also difficult to assess changes overtime, as illustrated by the Irish case. This is because change in some measures can distort the interpretation of others. For example, '*the gender gap in unemployment can be reduced either by a rise in the employment rate of women or by a rise in the unemployment*

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<sup>6</sup> They use six indicators: the employment rate of women compared to men's (head count); the employment rate of mothers with young children (aged seven or less) compared to fathers (full-time equivalent); the relative concentration of women in higher positions compared to men; the male-female wage gap; the proportion of women earning less than 50 per cent of the national median income (on a yearly basis) compared to the corresponding proportion of men; and the male-female gap in unpaid time spent on caring for children and other persons.

<sup>7</sup> This is measured using the female employment rate (head count); the employment rate of mothers with children aged seven or less (FTE); the employment rate of women aged 50-64 (FTE); the proportion of women in higher positions; the female unemployment rate and the female youth unemployment rate.

rate of men. In short, some variables do not lend themselves to analyses based on reducing gender gaps and ... must be left out of the equation' (p. 355) Nevertheless, Plantenga and Hansen argue that these indicators can provide an overall picture of labour market structures and change.

These first two sets of criteria are then presented using radar charts that simultaneously plot several indicators. These values can then be used to delineate the total surface area of the radar diagram and aggregated to calculate a SMOP index (Surface Measure of Overall Performance) (see Speckesser et al. 1998: 76ff for more details on this method). Combining measures on gender equity and labour market position they generate a composite indicator, and interpret these in relation to broader societal factors, to generate four clusters in terms of those above and below the U15 average. '*Under performers*' include Italy, Greece, Spain and the Netherlands, all of which have a lack of a consistent care policy. *Medium performers* include Ireland, Germany, Belgium and France. Ireland's success is largely due to the spectacular economic growth, despite miserable infrastructural support. Germany, on the other hand, presents a somewhat juxtaposed Janus-like position in relation to a more conservative west, faced with a more progressive, but gradually whittled away eastern model supporting maternal employment. *Middle to high performers* includes the unlikely partners of the UK, Finland, Luxembourg, Austria and Portugal. The relatively low levels of female unemployment in the UK and Austria boosts their score, which would be equivalent to a high employment rate, or a non-existent wage gap between men and women; and Portugal has a high score because of its high rate of female full-time employment. Finally, it comes as no surprise that among the *high performers* are Denmark and Sweden.

This analysis clearly marks an important advance in attempting to analyse gendered differences in the quality of work across societies. The authors conclude that such an exercise depends on having access to comparable data and being sensitive to the fact that some indicators are very sensitive and volatile to changing economic circumstances, as well as having a close interrelationship. This makes it more difficult to identify clear-cut cases of causality and the potential for intervention without taking into account national specificities. Plantenga and Hansen are also aware that their assessments reflect the choice of indicators and assumes an equal weighting between them, but they also argue that such indicators are 'solid enough' to allow us to monitor equal opportunities policies and the quality of life and work for women in different societies.

## 5. Conclusions

In sum the range of research approaches presented here indicates how the differences between the typologies discussed are sensitive to the forms of measurement, the choice of policies included in the analysis and their impact on the quality of life and work for men and women. I have critically evaluated four approaches used for comparative research of employment: the societal effect, ideal types, building on two axes of variation, as well as clustering and benchmarking approaches.

Established typologies have the advantages of allowing us to talk about distinct trajectories of development in the regulation of work and social policy (O'Reilly and Spee 1998). However, the parsimony of explanation often reduces processes and outcomes to two determinate dimensions; the result can be one of describing how countries are locked into particular trajectories. This perspective does not always help explain why or how some countries seem to break out of a vicious circle and achieve success, for example, the Netherlands, Ireland and the UK. And the inverse is also true, in that some countries with a supposedly virtuous circle of institutions have fallen into serious economic and employment difficulties with a general decline in the quality of work, for example Germany and Japan.

Further problems relate to typologies generated to deal with the organisation of work in an industrial past. Changing working conditions and the growth of service sector employment may lead, for example, through the growth of atypical employment, to major differences in the structure of the labour force and the employment relationship. For example, in some sectors the proportion of 'atypical' employment may actually be the norm, especially for women. These problems are clearly related to the controversies raised about the level of analysis, the extent of generalisation between sectors and national models and the growing diversity of the workforce. The simultaneous effects of labour market restructuring and welfare state reform have, in the eyes of some researchers, indicated the need to make stronger links between these two spheres. However, it is not apparent from existing research that this is an easy task to solve. In particular it requires a redefinition of first, the pertinent variables, second the groups concerned and third the level of analysis.

One thing we should learn from the different approaches discussed here is that the complexity of contemporary society does not allow for a definitive, all encompassing model. Added to this, there are no pre-set 'solutions' that can be readily adopted to solve the 'problems' of a particular society, at a given historical point. Instead the development of new solutions will very much depend on the way social and industrial policies have been developed in the past, the type of compromises they have instigated and the type of conflicts that are likely to result from them in the future. Looking for lack of fit and contradictions may also allow us to identify where future change will occur, as well as avoiding the charges of functionalism and the restrictions of path dependency. Typologies need to be treated with a healthy dose of scepticism, and the reader needs to look for what has been left out or ignored in order to achieve the aesthetic perfection of fit if we are to attempt to address the slippery question of assessing the differentiated impact of the quality of employment and welfare for men and women.

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