

Causal Mechanisms in the Analysis of Social Policy Dynamics

Veranstalter SFB 1342 "Globale Entwicklungsdynamiken von Sozialpolitik"

Veranstaltungsort Universität Bremen

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Conference of the CRC 1342 Global Dynamics of Social Policy, Bremen

Recent theoretical and methodological developments in the social sciences converge into the approach of "mechanism-based explanation". Originating from different disciplines such as analytical sociology, political sociology, comparative historical analysis and qualitative research in political science, mechanism-based approaches stress that phenomena cannot fully be explained by correlations between variables: Causal mechanisms are the "cogs and wheels" that scholars come across when opening the "black box" of correlations.

Despite the expanding literature on this topic, two deficits have not been resolved so far:

1. There is no convincing compilation of mechanisms that drive social and political processes. Previous proposals for a comprehensive list of mechanisms collect elements of very different scales and levels. There is no shared understanding on what level (micro, meso, macro) mechanisms should be allocated and what elements a mechanism should have to count as a mechanism.
2. There is also a lack of systematic applications of mechanism-based approaches to an entire policy field. So far, mechanism-based approaches have primarily been used in single case studies or comparative case studies with a limited scope and range. Adopting a mechanism-based approach for studying the transnational dynamics of an entire policy field might be a decisive test for the fruitfulness of mechanism-based approaches. This conference aims to stimulate discussion on the characteristics of causal mechanisms, and to establish a closer link between

these concepts and the study of social policy dynamics.

Confirmed speakers so far:

Renate Mayntz (Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies)

James Mahoney (Northwestern University)

Peter Starke (University of Southern Denmark).

We invite a variety of contributions:

First, we are interested in contributions that engage conceptually with specific types of mechanisms, and that reflect on mechanism-based explanation in general: How does mechanism-based explanation add to our understanding of social phenomena? Can we systematically differentiate between different types of causal mechanisms, for example when it comes to analytical levels, stages within the political process, or key actors? Moreover, we are interested in the question if it is possible to compile a set of elementary or basic causal mechanisms. Single mechanisms –stressing different levels of analysis –have been identified in a wide range of research areas, such as e.g. diffusion mechanisms, historical-institutionalist feedback mechanisms, mechanisms focusing on the interaction of actors, e.g. in the actor-centred institutionalism, or mechanisms from behavioural economics. So far, however, the literature lacks a general and systematic compilation of basic causal mechanisms. Such a set of causal mechanisms could bridge the discussion of mechanisms that, up to date, primarily takes place in isolated research areas. Moreover, such a “toolbox” could support empirical research in identifying the crucial steps of a causal process, and specify the conditions under which such a causal process unfolds.

Second, we are interested in specific sets of causal mechanisms in the development of social policy, and ask if common patterns can be identified when it comes to explaining social policy dynamics, more specifically:

- How can we explain the expansion of non-inclusive social policy programs to further social groups? So far, comparative welfare state research has stressed different factors such as e.g. power resources, partisan politics, or path dependence when it comes to explaining the expansion of social policy programs. However, if we focus more specifically on the causal mechanisms that connect these factors and lead to the expansion of social policies, we are very likely to find recurring causal mechanisms or more complex patterns of linked mechanisms, such as e.g. contempt for existing social circumstances, sympathy with groups that are perceived as highly deserving, or enthusiasm within mobilized groups.

- Why did the “Bismarck model” not become a universal model of welfare? While after World War II, especially Western countries experienced an expansion of contribution-based models, in recent years we face an expansion of different models, especially in middle and low-income countries, which is often, but not always preceded by a failure to introduce universal contribution-based schemes. We assume that such failed attempts can be found in different geographical, political, and historical contexts, implying similar causal mechanisms, such as e.g. resentments of established groups against new groups and the securing of privileges.
- Why do some social policies become a role model for other contexts, i.e. why do some social policy ideas travel around the globe? While the diffusion literature has already found some answers to this question on the macro level (especially with the well-known typology of coercion, competition, emulation, and learning), we are interested in more fine-grained mechanisms that stress interdependence, focusing on the causal mechanisms that connect the perception of new ideas with the translation and integration of these ideas into national legacies, which might be driven by mechanisms such as admiration (for foreign ideas), or the urge to demonstrate the capacity to act.

Conference Organizers:

CRC 1342 „Global Dynamics of Social Policy“, University of Bremen:

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Further Information (PDF)
