

Towards a spatial social policy: Bridging the gap between geography and social policy. Adam Whitworth Bristol: Policy Press, 2019. ISBN: 9781447337911; £24.00 (Pbk)

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DOI:
[10.1111/spol.12750](https://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12750)

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Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (Harvard):
Green, A 2021, 'Towards a spatial social policy: Bridging the gap between geography and social policy. Adam Whitworth Bristol: Policy Press, 2019. ISBN: 9781447337911; £24.00 (Pbk)', *Social Policy and Administration*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12750>

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Towards a spatial social policy: Bridging the gap between geography and social policy

Adam Whitworth

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This edited volume is concerned with exploring conceptual and philosophical linkages between human geography and social policy. Such linkages are ripe for investigation given the traditional neglect of the spatial dimension in social policy. The collection of ten chapters includes contributions which are interesting and insightful in their own right but the varied foci mean that for this reviewer the collection overall does not provide additional value over the sum of the individual parts. Perhaps this is not surprising given that no such explicit ambition is set at the outset. Rather the claim set out by Whitworth in the Introduction is that the chapters develop a range of new conceptual, methodological and empirical policy insights at the interface of human geography and social policy.

Following a useful introductory chapter which provides a guide to the subject matter covered, the main part of the book is divided into three main parts: Concepts, Themes and Methods. A final tenth chapter provides a Retrospective, subtitled “taking stock and looking to the future”, and presents reflections on the “encounter” between social policy and geography, as opposed to a Conclusion.

The idea behind the “Concepts” part of the book is to explore selected theoretical ideas from human geography around the multiple possible understandings of space and to demonstrate their potential to inform social policy scholarship and practice. The two chapters in this part of the book are rather different in character. Jones looks at spaces of welfare localism and argues that localities must be understood not only in terms of absolute spaces on maps but also as relative and relational dynamic entities. He emphasises the contingency and relationality of localities and suggests that identification and description of localities needs to be an intrinsic part of the research process. By contrast Philo's chapter focuses on the role of space in the writings of Foucault on power, discipline and governmentalities.

The “Themes” part of the book sets out to highlight the relevance of exploring the interface between geography and social policy across mainstream policy debates. The four chapters in this part comprise an eclectic mix. Minton's chapter is concerned with housing and highlights the stigmatising narratives towards social housing and the people who live in it. Whitworth's chapter concentrates on employment support and explores the way in which space is inter-woven into analytical and policy understandings of welfare-to-work policies. He contends that policy contexts across advanced economies have reconfigured welfare systems to consolidate paid work as the cornerstone of citizenship obligations. He highlights how “support” varies across different national regimes, ranging from voluntary help, to mandatory coercion or financial incentivisation and reward. Wiggan's chapter on financialisation focuses on recent experimentation with social investment bonds as a new vehicle to structure the financing, payment and incentive structures of social policy interventions. In her chapter, Pykett explores how behavioural and neuroscientifically

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informed public policies are carving out new spatialities of social policies, recognising that individuals do not behave according to the neoliberal maxims of economic rationality.

The “Methods” part of the book contains two particularly strong chapters that make the case for the value-added of using spatial methodologies in social policy research. Harris examines regression—a technique that is used very widely but often in a non-spatial way that assumes that economic and social phenomena at particular locations are independent of what is measured at surrounding locations. He argues strongly for the need for more spatially informed foundations to statistical enquiries in recognition that geographical context and geographically rooted social outcomes are not independent of where the processes giving rise to these outcomes are taking place. In the second methodological chapter, Orford and Webb explain how mapping and spatial analysis make GIS powerful tools for investigating variations in social and economic problems across space, how different areas relate to each other and how policy interventions may have different outcomes geographically. They outline how Big Data, linked data, Open Data and greater prevalence of GIS bring new and greater opportunities for a more spatial social policy.

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