

Exploring Theories and Social Policy Changes During COVID-19 Pandemic

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Summary. The COVID-19 pandemic presented unprecedented challenges to the capacity of developed welfare states to meet emerging needs. In its initial year, the pandemic prompted a wave of new social policy programmes and modifications to existing ones. This study empirically investigates the applicability of various social theories in elucidating the dynamics of social policy changes during the COVID-19 crisis.

Reflective analysis employs Hegelian dialectics as a methodological framework on established theories, including welfare regime theory, path dependence theory, path creation, and incorporates contemporary perspectives such as capability theory. The aim is to reflect and discern what these approaches explain and how these theoretical paradigms account for the observed shifts in social policy dynamics.

The paper builds on previously published studies focused on the dynamics of persistence and change, mitigation and prevention, divergence and convergence, and continuity and irruption in social policies implemented in response to the pandemic. The article also contributes at developing a theoretical and methodological reflective approach to examine social policy changes in multiple contexts.

Keywords: social policy changes, social theory, dialectical approach, COVID-19 pandemic, OECD-countries

1. Introduction to dialectical approach

The pandemic is an example of a systemic health crisis that has had severe socio-economic consequences globally. This article focuses on re-examining the theoretical approaches and concepts with which we have studied the changes during the pandemic, particularly in relation to social security and employment. The article aims to conduct a re-examination with a dialectical approach and develop a theoretical and methodological framework based on previous studies in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The study empirically investigates the applicability of various theories in elucidating the dynamics of social policy changes in OECD countries during the crisis. By drawing on established social theories and incorporating contemporary perspectives, the study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the shifts in social policy dynamics during the pandemic. The study is grounded in empirical evidence from previously pub-

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lished studies, which add credibility to the re-examination and theoretical development. The analysis includes diverse approaches to studying social policy changes, such as path dependence theory, path creation, welfare regime theory and capability theory, providing a comprehensive understanding of social policy dynamics. Using Hegelian dialectics as a methodological framework allows for a reflective approach to theory development, enabling the study to adapt and evolve based on new evidence and empirical studies. The article contributes to the contemporary social scientific discussion by offering a rigorous and reflective approach to understanding social policy changes during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

Dialectical approach allows to capture the dynamic and interconnected nature of intergenerational relationships and to understand the survival of intergenerational solidarity despite apparent reciprocity imbalance at the system level. The methodological approach (postmodern Hegelian dialectics) relates theoretical foundations and concepts to previous empirical results and conclusions. This dialectic pluralism includes thesis and antithesis dynamics and attempts to bring synthesis or interpretation in a core approach (Johnson, 2017; Marsh & Smith, 2010). The dialectical approach has been influenced mainly by the Hegelian three-stage method. The concept of dialectics originates in ancient philosophy in the West and East. Dialectics was part of Plato's conceptual thinking and argumentations, then with Hegel and, for instance, with the Frankfurt school. An ideal dialectics approach assumes an invariance in "truth" (Adorno, 1958, 2). The dialectics provides explanations of the possible categories of truth. Pressures transform reality and knowledge and, thus, are in a continuous development process. Therefore, dialectics can also be called the logic of change (Niiniluoto, 1984, 108; Smith, 2010).

This study interprets the dialectics method (Hegelian dialectics) as a movement of the theories when new evidence and empirical studies arise (e.g., Johnson, 2017; Marsh & Smith, 2010). As a method, it resonates in contemporary social theory because it does not stand still but instead constantly develops and corrects itself when new and versatile knowledge arrives in the current social research context. Theories from different traditions are dialectically engaged towards enhanced, reframed or new understandings, as Greene and Hall (2007) have pointed out. Also dialectic pluralism has been defined (e.g., Johnson, 2017) as a process that will produce new wholes, thriving on tensions from competing theories and back-and-forth disputation and examination. Pluralism means that multiple paradigms and perspectives can be concurrently equally valued.

In this study, the analysis proceeds with the thesis phase, the antithesis phase as a counter-thesis and, finally, forming a synthesis – compromise or new theoretical interpretation based on the existing knowledge. The first moment (in the following term phase) is understanding a concept or theory in general. In this study, the first phase refers to the theory itself. At this moment, the definitions seem stable. The second dialectical phase is when the first phase gets its counterpart. This study understands the second phase as results and empirical evidence from earlier examinations. Thus, the second phase is not necessarily the opposite of the first phase or a contradiction. The third phase gives a dissolution or transition between these angles.

Table 1. Previous comparative studies in re-examination and theoretical and methodological developing

Publications	Research questions (RQs)	Theoretical approach	Methodology
Social Policy and Society	RQ1) Which novel direct payments did countries implement during the COVID-19 pandemic? RQ2) Have new path creations continued and been modified? RQ3) What characteristics did novel direct payments implemented due to the COVID-19 pandemic share with ideal types of universal basic income?	Third order changes and path creation	Applying analytical frame based on path creation and features of universal basic income. Novel direct payments in OECD countries introduced in the year 2020 with follow-up until July 2023
International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy	RQ1) What major mitigative and preventive employment-related measures did countries implement due to COVID-19? RQ2) Did the measures continue from the advent of the pandemic and form new path creations?	Capability approach, path creation	Applying an analytical framework based on capability theory (mitigative and preventive measures, transitions and initial outcomes) Major mitigative and preventive employment-related measures in 13 OECD countries were introduced in the year 2020, with follow-up until July 2022
Journal of International and Comparative Social Policy	RQ1) What changes did 10 welfare states implement during the first year of the pandemic (2020) compared to pre-pandemic social protection measures? RQ2) Do changes in social protection show differentiation or similarities within and beyond welfare regimes?	Path dependence theory, path creation	Re-developed theory of political change to make an analytical framework to study the pattern of changes in an abbreviated period Major social policy changes in 10 OECD countries introduced in year 2020
International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy	The scoping review analyses comparative studies on social policy measures implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic in Global North welfare states. Second, the paper considers the potential effect of the regimes on the responses.	Welfare regime theory	Systematic scoping review Overall, 698 titles/abstracts/articles were screened, and 16 were selected by applying inclusion criteria in period 1.1.2020–28.2.2022
Ministry of Social Affairs and Health (working paper)	RQ1) What social policy changes as measures related to the COVID-19 pandemic were implemented in 13 OECD countries in 2020.	Welfare regime theory, path-dependence theory	Re-developed theory of political change to create an analytical framework to study the pattern of changes in an abbreviated period Major social policy changes in 13 OECD countries introduced in year 2020

Analysis of the thesis–antithesis synthetics includes diverse approaches to studying changes (compare Marsh & Smith, 2000). Previous studies included for re-examination are demonstrated in Table 1.

Table 1 summarises the published studies included in this re-examination. The changes in social policy due to the pandemic have unified the included studies and research questions. The continuity and shaping of measures have also been the focus of research. In studies, social policy changes have been defined broadly, including mitigative and prevention measures. A large part of the measures has also been linked to employment promotion. In addition, the studies are connected to the reflection on the welfare state regimes.

2. Theoretical reflection: the first phase of the analysis

Re-examination is based on four theoretical approaches – welfare regime theory, path dependence theory, path-creation and capability approach – which have been empirically studied to interpret changes in the context of coronaviruses. These theoretical foundations are defined in the following and their relevance to analysing social policy changes is explained.

First, although change is present everywhere and is part of the natural processes of welfare state functioning, path dependence theory explains that the institutional logic of existing social protection systems is layered and developed over a long time, and is dependent on earlier decisions, rules, and legitimations (Kangas, 2020; Starke, Kaasch & van Hooren, 2013; Streeck & Thelen, 2005). According to path dependence theory, continuity is more evident than change. Change is often conditioned with earlier decisions and institutional settings (e.g., Pierson, 2004). This is why changes are often relatively incremental rather than irruptive as Streeck and Thelen (2005) have analysed. Path dependence is often observed in the persistence of institutions and policies over time. In previous studies, we re-developed an analytical framework to interpret social policy change using Peter Hall’s distinction between first-, second- and third-order change (Mäntyneva, Ketonen, Peltoniemi, Aaltonen & Hiilamo, 2021; Mäntyneva, Ketonen and Hiilamo, 2023). While first- and second-order changes follow the path-dependence thesis, third-order changes can be interpreted as path-breaking (Mäntyneva et al., 2021; Mäntyneva et al., 2023). First-order changes were, for instance, using old instruments (benefits) but increasing the benefit level. Second-order changes expanded old instruments like benefits and schemes to new groups of people. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, third-order changes included the introduction of new income transfers or schemes.

Second, the continuity and modification of the measures was examined while the pandemic continued (both path-dependent and not) with the concept of path creation. Path creation is an accumulation of slight changes in the process (e.g., Lessenich, 2005; Starke et al., 2013; Hogan, Howlett & Murphy, 2022). Path creation includes various moments from path initiation to path termination. For example, initiating a path trajec-

tory can lead to development (path reinforcement). The trajectory can change its direction or speed (path clearing) and end with path termination. Path termination can also occur through gradual policy dismantling over time (Hogan et al., 2022).

Third, the type of welfare state and welfare regime matters to the quality of the changes (Esping-Andersen, 1999; 2002; Castles, 2010). Welfare regime theory distinguishes between liberal, corporatist and social democratic welfare state models (Esping-Andersen, 1990). This typification is based on defining the relationships and weight between the welfare state, the market (including the labour market) and the family. Similarities in the historical development of welfare states and the formation of institutional structures have also been unifying factors. In theory, decommodification and social stratification play a vital role. Decommodification describes how welfare states have protected people's lives and living standards from social risks or introduced preventive measures. This is how the divergence of welfare states and regimes is related to the path dependence theory. One of the arguments or hypotheses common in the comparative welfare state is that the type of welfare state (and regime) matters to the quality of the changes (Castles, 2010). Castles (2010) analysed how unexpected national and international emergencies affect the character of welfare state interventions and welfare state development, with examples of momentous events in history. If governments implement entirely new measures, then welfare states may break away from existing path dependencies and create new ones for social protection reforms (Van de Ven, Polley, Garud & Venkataraman, 1999).

Welfare regimes were used as a criterion for selecting the welfare states in our earlier studies (Mäntyneva et al., 2021; Mäntyneva, Ketonen and Hiilamo, 2022; Mäntyneva et al., 2023; Mäntyneva & Hiilamo 2023). The primary study consisted of 13 welfare states, primarily European countries, representing five distinct welfare regimes. Finland and Sweden represent the Nordic and so called the social-democratic welfare regime while Germany and the Netherlands express the corporate-conservative welfare regime. The United Kingdom and the United States represent liberal welfare regimes. Moreover, we included Italy and Spain in the Mediterranean regime and South Korea and Japan in the East Asian welfare regime. To examine path dependence, the study (Mäntyneva et al., 2023) included 10 welfare states representing 5 welfare regimes, with a pair of countries for each. New initiatives were examined through all OECD countries (Mäntyneva et al., 2023).

The fourth theoretical perspective is capability theory (Sen & Nussbaum, 1993), in which public and social policies play a critical role in enabling capabilities and imposing certain conditions on people's capabilities, agency and freedoms across various life situations and through lifespans (Sen, 1999; 2009; Robeyns, 2005; Alkire & Deneulin, 2009). Amartya Sen (1999) identified distinct freedoms that are achieved through capabilities, actions and functioning – referring to both what individuals can be and do in their lives. These freedoms encompass socioeconomic aspects such as opportunities for employment to promote people's well-being. From capability theory, government mitigative measures are necessary during the crisis (negative freedom). Positive freedom refers to preventive measures of a transitional and bridging nature to help people achieve

diverse outcomes in the pandemic. Perspective on the capability approach was to study the capabilities of welfare states that include the policy measures of various governments, particularly employment-related measures, as a unit of analysis (Robeyns, 2005; 2017; Bonvin & Orton, 2009). The classification of preventive and mitigating measures was the first phase of analysis. The data related to the study focused on two themes: unemployment protection and employment promotion. By examining mitigative and preventive measures, a comprehensive understanding was gained on how to strengthen social protection and promote employment opportunities, thereby enhancing the overall well-being of individuals in society.

Figure 1 below clarifies the connections between theories and methodology in examining social changes. As a starting point, contemporary welfare states are, to a greater or lesser extent, developed with cumulative processes in a path-dependent way. These measures have been studied from three qualitative and quantitative aspects: thematic (related to social risks), the dichotomy between mitigative and preventive measures, and data representing welfare regimes. Second, we analysed if these measures have continued and formulated new path-creations. The capability approach was also used to analyse preliminary policy outcomes with changes in employment and unemployment situations (Mäntyneva & Hiilamo, 2023).

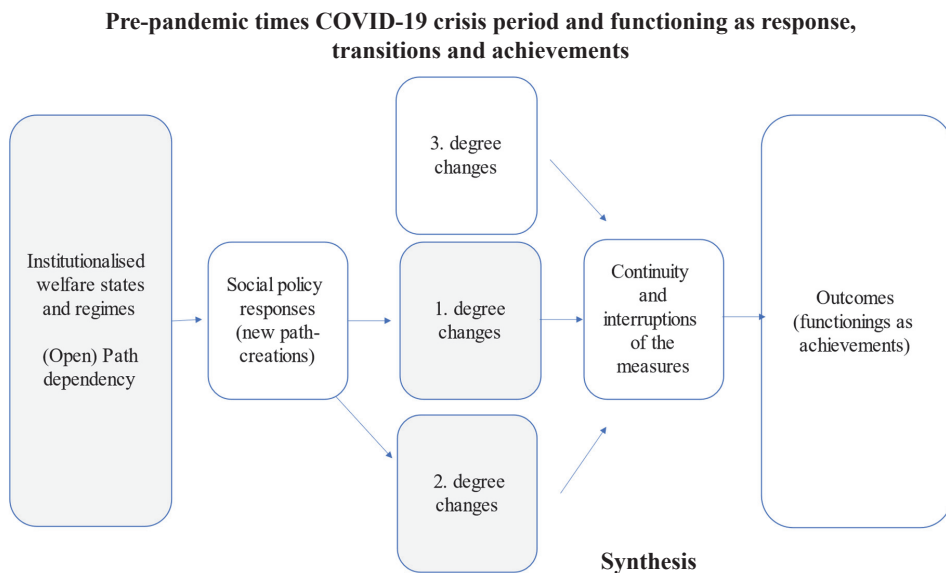


Figure 1. Suggested framework to examine social policy changes

The exploration and examination of COVID-19 measures during the pandemic focus on the period from 1.1.2020 to 31.12.2020, that is, when the primary data was also collected and rechecked afterwards. The analysis and categorisation of the changes (1. order change, 2. order change, and 3. order change) were primarily based on this data. The

numbers and relative shares of crucial changes were also based on this framework and the mentioned period.

The exception is one article aimed to analyse direct payments as an example of 3. order changes. This data collection was first broadened to all OECD countries. To answer the research question of continuity and interruptions of the measures, the follow-ups were made in 2021, 2022 and by June 2023.

3. When theory meets empirical practice: second phase of the analysis

Empirical evidence on social policy changes is analysed through the defined theoretical theories with the cross-cutting content lines: the dynamics of persistence and change, convergence and divergence, mitigation and prevention, and continuity and interruption.

The dynamics of persistence and change

The immediate COVID-19 social policy responses broadened the array of social security. Changes in welfare states are also often retrenchments and linked to the austerity eras. The analytical framework (Mäntyneva et al. 2021; Mäntyneva et al., 2023) included both the possibility of a path-dependence thesis and a possibility for changes with novel measures that do not follow pre-pandemic social policy measures and politics. The study of 10 OECD countries evidenced that the COVID-19 pandemic caused mostly first-order welfare state changes (76%) within social protection measures that showed flexibility within pre-existing social protection measures and expansion without departures from core social protection measures in those countries.

In addition, second-order changes (15%) expanded pre-pandemic instruments and followed the path-dependence thesis. The second-order changes directed preexisting compensations to new beneficiary groups. These changes included unemployment benefits, sickness benefits, benefits for families with children, minimum income schemes, last resort benefits and employment promotion. Notably, such changes altered the relationship between the state and many groups of self-employed freelancers and businesses affected by COVID-19. (Mäntyneva et al., 2023)

Beyond these horizontal and vertical path-dependent changes, some changes had transformative elements at the country level, specifically during the pandemic. Approximately 9% of the changes were identified as novel measures compared to pre-pandemic policies. They included measures related to employment promotion, student benefits and direct income transfers. Beyond traditional risk categories, direct payments were targeted to a significant share of the people or all citizens and residents. (Mäntyneva et al., 2023)

Novel direct payments were examined in a separate empirical study covering all OECD countries (Mäntyneva & Hiilamo, 2024). The main conclusion from the study was that while most OECD countries did not introduce novel payments beyond general social risk pooling, 11 countries did introduce new income transfers. These countries

were Australia, Chile, Colombia, Denmark, Israel, Italy, Japan (2), Spain, South Korea, the United Kingdom and the United States (2). First, novel direct payments were delivered once or were periodically combined with more than one social beneficiary or group in society (Australia, Denmark, the United Kingdom and the United States). Second, countries provided benefits in accordance with needs (Italy, Spain, Japan and South Korea). Third, inclusive benefits to all (or to nearly all) in society (Japan, South Korea and to a great extent in Israel).

Convergence and divergence

Social policy changes during the pandemic evidenced differences between universalist and residual welfare states. However, the pandemic responses also showed convergence between welfare states and regimes. Based on a systematic review (Mäntyneva et al., 2022), Eastern and continental Europe showed the most evidence of a welfare-regime developmental mix. This indicates a change from a more residual system towards universal coverage of social protection and, in general, the development of a welfare regime different from the one a particular country has traditionally espoused. In addition, the COVID-19 responses varied within liberal welfare regimes, whereas differences between Southern Europe and Northern countries were apparent.

Further, the study (Author(s)) also brought new insights into the relationship between changes and welfare regimes. Thematically, first-order changes with social risk categories in all societies showed to some extent convergence beyond regimes. The Mediterranean regime countries were distinct regarding second-order changes by extending the benefits coverage, notably to work patterns like the self-employed and freelancers. However, the absolute number of expanded measures was modest in Nordic countries and continental Europe. In the Asian welfare regime, Japan and South Korea protected people against traditional risks more than preventing the new risks emphasized in European countries. However, the Asian welfare states adopted bolder measures than other representatives of different regimes.

In a previous study, was (Mäntyneva & Hiilamo, 2024) evidenced that novel direct payments shared some commonalities across OECD countries. As discussed above, thematically responses were analysed in three groups, crossing welfare regime boundaries. Thus, finding demonstrates the convergences of means in social security across OECD countries during the time of the pandemic.

The study investigating employment measures (Mäntyneva & Hiilamo, 2023) demonstrated that, thematically, emergency measures had the same characteristics from one country and welfare state regime to another. Most of the measures were changes to unemployment protection to improve the unemployed socioeconomic situation and, as a preventive measure, employment promotion measures to preserve jobs.

However, the welfare states had their priorities, distinct from peer countries within welfare regimes. For instance, Sweden, Finland, Italy and Spain prioritised unemployment prevention as a preventive measure. While Germany emphasised the prevention of

over-indebtedness and benefits for families with children, the Netherlands was in line with Nordic countries, introducing several changes to employment promotion. Changes to sickness benefits and employment promotion were needed in South Korea. In Japan, the government made changes to protect the incomes of families with children and prevent unemployment with temporary allowances, to give some examples of diversity.

Mitigation and prevention

Mitigative measures focus on stabilising current living conditions in the long term, while preventive measures are oriented toward proactive solutions. In this context, we conducted a thematic analysis of the primary mitigative and preventative measures to assess their quality and effectiveness. The responses in welfare states (13 welfare states in total) were classified into 10 themes as social risks. Included themes are (1) unemployment benefits, (2) sickness benefits, (3) pensions, (4) benefits for families with children, (5) minimum income schemes and last-resort benefits, (6) direct payments beyond risk categories, (7) employment promotion, (8) benefits for students, (9) prevention of over-indebtedness and (10) housing support. Themes 1–5 represented traditional social risks, and themes 6–10 represented the new risks in modern societies (Mäntyneva et al., 2021).

By examining both types of measures, we gained understanding how welfare states strengthened social protection and promoted employment opportunities, thereby enhanced the overall well-being of individuals in society. Based on this thinking, mitigative measures represent tools to tackle traditional risks like unemployment in this case. Mitigative measures, such as unemployment protection, provide an essential safety net in societies. The emphasis on social policy is, however, reactive. In turn, employment promotion measures are more precative and proactive. In times of crisis, mitigative and preventive measures can work as bridging support in people's lives, as the emphasis on the former is to stabilise living conditions. (Mäntyneva & Hiilamo, 2023).

First, most employment measures were preventive (66%), which justifies that countries were concentrating on immediate priorities and exhibiting a capability to formulate inclusive transitions that would last beyond the crisis. In our study, Mediterranean countries – Italy and Spain – tended to use more preventive measures in quantitative terms, in contrast to welfare regimes elsewhere. Certain countries also implemented significant changes concerning job retention schemes or initiated completely new schemes (e.g., the UK and Iceland). Nevertheless, improvements in social protection measures for the unemployed were also needed. (Mäntyneva & Hiilamo, 2023).

Preventive employment-related measures were essential for countries seeking to avoid a rapid increase in unemployment in an abbreviated period. However, short-term schemes, wage compensations and furlough schemes significantly varied between countries. In the early phase of the pandemic, in April 2020, such measures covered one-fifth of the labour force in OECD countries, varying wildly from one welfare state to another.

Continuity and interruption

The emphasis on path creation allows a more nuanced analysis of modifications and gradual transformations of the measures and continuity aspects (Hogan et al., 2022; Streeck & Thelen, 2005) that amend path-dependence theory. The question of continuity in the COVID-19 responses and context also relates to capability theory and the possibility of creating positive transitions. These questions were particularly examined in the research article “Capability of welfare states to spread inclusion with employment-related measures” (Mäntyneva & Hiilamo, 2023). First, approximately 60% of the measures showed gradual transformation with changed eligibility criteria and amount or length of income transfer. In July 2022, only 11% of the measures were in use. Thus, interruption of the measures was a mainstream strategy. A new layoff scheme in the UK was continuing, combining unemployment benefits and one-off payments in Germany and combining training in Norway (Mäntyneva & Hiilamo, 2023). We also argued that the continuation of the measures was related to the unemployment situation in the countries studied.

Using all OECD countries as a study sample, we also examined the path creation perspective among novel measures (Mäntyneva & Hiilamo, 2024). Novel direct payments were defined as one-off, or periodic (time-bounded or open-ended) benefits delivered beyond social risk categories such as unemployment or sickness. Australia, Chile, Colombia, Italy, Japan, South Korea and the United States continued these measures during the pandemic; the conditionality of direct payments was also changed in some cases. Continuity was more probable than interrupting financial aid in the early phases of the pandemic. However, most of the novel payments due to COVID-19 ended by June 2023 and. Welfare states and institutions returned to the status quo within novel direct payments due to COVID-19. Exceptions were Citizen Income as an example of incremental transformation from Solidarity Income in Columbia, that was still in use. In Spain, The Minimum Vital Income was introduced as a permanent part of social security in Spain and is an example how the pandemic accelerated the transformation.

4. Synthesis: the third phase of the analysis

This article and the above-discussed theoretical approaches and empirical studies focused on a different aspect of social policy change. To sum up, as a precondition, theoretical thinking needs to be operationalised methodologically and analytically if the purpose of the paper is not to re-develop theory inductively. Rethinking the theoretical foundations and previous examinations, the following conclusions can be made.

The synthesis of the previous studies prompts a critical reevaluation of the challenges faced and the potential solutions required to establish a new equilibrium in social policy paradigms amidst the ongoing uncertainties posed by the COVID-19 pandemic (see Table 2). The path dependence thesis resonated best with interpreting persistence and change. The dynamics of perseverance and change were central to understanding how social policy measures evolve. Measures in diverse welfare states were more based on pre-pandemic policies than reforming during a crisis. Convergence and divergence

were relevant for comparing the responses of various welfare states and applying welfare regime theory.

Table 2. **Applicability of theories to examine social policy changes**

Theories related to social change/counterforces of development	Path dependence theory	Path creation	Welfare regime theory	Capability theory
Persistence and change	***	**	**	*
Convergence and divergence	*	*	***	*
Mitigation and prevention	*	*	**	***
Continuity and interruption	**	***	*	**

Most welfare states first expanded changes and then returned to pre-pandemic social policies with a few exceptions. Mitigation and prevention were important distinctions for understanding the goals and outcomes of social policy measures with capability theory while continuity and interruption were vital for analysing the path creations. Overall, the path creation perspective and the distinction between different orders of change best explain the response dynamics.

All temporary social policy changes can be interpreted as signals about the lack of crisis resistance of current social security systems in contemporary societies. The adequacy of the social security level for a decent life, social security coverage and the need for new tools might lead to novel changes over time. Some OECD countries have made efforts to improve social security for nonstandard and nontypical work. Changes also addressed best practices that were particularly evidenced in building bridges through the crisis with employment promotion measures that were analysed using a capability approach. Direct one-off payments proved an efficient way to balance socioeconomic situations in various OECD countries while some periodical direct payments shared innovative features with universal basic income in emergencies as a quasi-basic income (Mäntyneva & Hiilamo, 2024).

5. Discussion

The path dependence thesis significantly explains the social policy changes during the pandemic. The dynamics of social policy measures reveal the significance of the path dependence theory. The results demonstrate horizontal and vertical expansion within welfare systems (Pierson, 2004). Needed expansions to secure sufficient living standards for nonstandard work is a central example of temporary changes expanding social security coverage. Thus, measures in diverse welfare states were more based on pre-pandemic policies than reforming during a crisis. The flexibility within current systems has also been evidenced in other COVID-19-related comparative studies (Moreira & Hick, 2021; Seemann, Becker, Hohnerlein & Wilman, 2021).

Path dependence theory also enabled an understanding of the measures introduced as third-order changes (Hall, 1999). The crisis accelerated already ongoing reform processes (for example, Vital Income in Spain). Still, countries introduced new instruments to balance the socioeconomic situation during the crisis, like the layoff scheme in the United Kingdom, which was path-breaking in the COVID-19 context and country level. Several OECD countries also introduced unique novel direct payments beyond current social risk pooling, sharing features with universal basic income. All new direct payments shared some commonalities with the ideal universal basic income and could be interpreted as quasi-basic income. When compared, the universality dimension of universal basic income was met to a greater extent in payments in Japan, South Korea, and Israel. One-off payments to several social beneficiary groups in Australia and Denmark were targeted but shared other characteristics of universal basic income. Notably, in the United States, the stimulus payments were cut only for those with relatively high incomes.

The path creation of initial responses during the pandemic opens new insights into the question of policy change in contemporary welfare states (path creation perspective, see Hogan et al., 2022; Garud, Kumaraswamy & Karnøe, 2010). For countries to make positive transitions, they also needed to address the crucial question of continuity, such as saving people's jobs and helping avoid income losses. Our previous study (Mäntyneva & Hiilamo, 2023) evidenced that by July 2022, almost all COVID-19 responses were interrupted, leading to path termination and a return to pre-pandemic policies (Hogan et al., 2022; Streeck & Thelen, 2005). The path creation approach enabled the analysis of modifications and changes to responses that were surprisingly common during the crisis period studied. This perspective also resonates with capability theory.

Welfare regime theory partly explains differences in changes but also explains changes that might shift and challenge welfare regimes. Overall, pandemic responses converged between welfare regimes (Mäntyneva et al., 2023). Welfare regime differences were observed between Nordic countries and Mediterranean welfare regime countries. In overall responses, Continental Europe and liberal regime countries were more diverse and with diverse development directions. Asian welfare regime countries relayed on more protective measures but were open to novel responses. Countries also had their priorities, particularly in liberal welfare regime countries (Béland, Dinan, Rocco & Waddan, 2021a; Hick & Murphy, 2021), but also in Southern European countries (Casquilho-Martins & Belchior-Rocha, 2022; Moreira, Léon, Coda Moscarola & Roumpakis, 2021).

From the welfare aspect, the crucial question is whether these measures helped and formulated transitions and outcomes through the crisis (capability theory). From the capability theoretical perspective, preventive measures as social policy changes stand for positive freedom compared to mitigative measures to be freedom from something. The study (Mäntyneva & Hiilamo, 2023) suggested, in general, that even in times of crisis, the government capability set has broadened individuals' capabilities, fostering

employment. First, most employment measures were preventive (66%), which justifies that countries were concentrating on immediate priorities and exhibiting a capability to formulate inclusive transitions that would last beyond the crisis. Mediterranean countries – Italy and Spain – tended to use more preventive measures in quantitative terms, in contrast to welfare regimes elsewhere.

For example, the significance of employment promotion measures was immense based on previous studies. In April 2020, these measures covered one-fifth of the labour force in OECD countries. Even though almost all social policy measures during the pandemic were interrupted, the expansions to current social security systems showed enormous flexibility within the institutionalised systems and policymaking (e.g., Cantillon et al., 2021; Leisering, 2021; Moreira & Hick, 2021; Seemann et al, 2021).

This study has several limitations. These conclusions concentrate solely on changes due to the pandemic. The convergence of the changes does not render void the fact that the coverage and level of social protection, as well as the level of social expenses, have varied at baseline in the studied welfare states and regimes. It is also important to note that previous studies analysed major social policy changes. Even though source criticality and accuracy were sought in data collection, and the obtained material was checked from different data sources, inaccuracies may have remained in the primary material. In the data analysis, the classification was based on the facts mentioned in the data sources, not the interpretation. For example, the novelty value (3. order changes) was determined contextually (the same benefit may be a regular part of social security in another country) and temporally during the COVID-19 pandemic (the same type of benefit may have been in use during previous economic recessions).

Empirical data and policy outcome investigations are focused particularly on unemployment and employment situations. The capability of the welfare states to perform and achieve desired impacts through social protection measures is a crucial question. It should be of interest for comparative studies in the future. The path creation of initial responses during the pandemic may open new insights into policy change across contemporary welfare states and regimes. Similarly, whether incremental improvements will lead to transformations might be interesting to examine and analyse in future studies. The concept of human (co)agency has a relevance as mediating concept that connects people's experiences, actions and achievements within institutionalised settings and social structures and diverse contexts.

The study's conclusions were theoretically generalised with the suggested theoretical approach. The value of the study is also to open new avenues to theory developments and comparative studies for scholars in social sciences. The scope of the framework and analysis could be broadened to investigate policy changes in various contexts. Findings of the study can also provide practical guidance for policymakers and practitioners in the field of social policy and contribute to the development of crisis-resilient social protection systems. Firstly, the study's conclusions can guide understanding of the significance of proactive and preventive measures to prevent new risks from being actualised as a social investment. Secondly, the findings evidenced the gaps in social protection that

were not as crisis-resilient and thus sustainable. Although welfare states have undergone many reforms and austerity eras, many welfare schemes and benefits are still based on typical traditional career profiles that do not fully reach the realities in current societies. One crucial observation and finding sums up that in many countries, there was a need to fill the gaps in social security in the precariat, as well as flexible working patterns like freelancers and temporary jobs. In OECD countries, public debates are also accurate in making sustainable improvements in social security and might have potential long-term impacts for societies, though most crisis social security measures have ended.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the most significant changes in social security were related to employment and working-age people. Furthermore, current systemic social risks are far different, with multiple consequences compared to cause-based benefits. These changes have led to rethinking welfare and social security in contemporary societies and finding new solutions.

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