Social Policy as a Reflection of Social Distance Concerns

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It is difficult to gain a reasonably complete perspective on all the activities that are carried out in the pursuit of social policy goals. This is partly due to the fact that these activities have been launched and defended by rather diverse ideological groups in the community, arising from a struggle between people of many opinions, often as compromise solutions in deeply rooted conflicts of interest.

This paper proposes some ideas about what happens in the concrete situations where social welfare policies are designed. It is suggested that the design takes shape on the basis of a model of society where the dimension of social distance plays a prominent role. It is also argued, tentatively, that social policy may be seen as a matter of manipulation of social distance.

Within this perspective social policy activities have three aims: (1) To reduce social distance both within and between certain groups, through transfer of social resources in a broad sense. (2) To impede the widening of social distance both within and between certain groups, through preventive work. (3) To establish norms about how much social distance there should be within and between certain groups, through setting priorities and transferring social resources to defined problem groups.
What is social policy?

There seems to be a great need for boundary-making and legitimation of social policy in relation to other areas of work or responsibility, for in the course of time there have been many attempts to define what social policy is or ought to be. Assumptions that are not always explicit lie in most of these definitions; one main assumption being that according to given criteria of justice a redistribution of resources to various groups in society should (or actually does) take place. Historically the definitions of social policy have reflected the shifting theories about causes of social problems, and we can see how individualistic explanatory models have been gradually replaced by various types of structural explanatory models, so now the searchlight is directed more toward the processes that bring about the problems.

One type of definitions specifies programs to special groups as the goal of social policy. This applies, for example, to the classic definition of social policy as the effort to improve the living conditions of the working class.\(^1\) Gradually, as class distinctions have been made on other and more diffuse grounds, boundary problems have appeared. In the Swedish discussions during the 1960's, social policy and "equality policy" are closely connected. Social policy, through compensation of needed resources to the underprivileged, is assumed to be a means to achieve greater equality.\(^2\)

A second type of definitions takes its departure in certain political ideas or ideologies about what "social problems" include. There is a comprehensive literature on this subject, and in the social sciences there has been a notable tendency to develop "schools" around the various approaches to the definition of social problems.\(^3\) In some cases attention has been directed toward the
consequences of such definitions for the "solutions" of problems, and the implications for their causes.
Some contributors have emphasized the importance of understanding the various forms of social disorganization. Others have stressed the idea that a social problem must be regarded as whatever people consider to be a social problem, or that which they label as a social problem. An important development in recent years has been to point out how particular social problems are necessary costs of the way the society is organized, and the objectives of social policy, then, are concerned to a greater extent with the community's own organization. 4)

A third type of definitions of social policy is based on the institutional arrangements that are intended to further given social policy goals. At times these goals will have been given in advance, in the form of official political positions. Also, at times those who are the defining party will reformulate these goals through their indication of which institutions they choose to call social policy institutions. Dich's definition of social policy as consisting of the type of official subsidies that citizens are not expected to pay back, may be seen as an example. 5) Rold Andersen's development of a social policy tool chest as a means to help political decision-makers make more rational choices, must also be seen as connected with this type of definition. 6)

Others have raised the point that so far the attempts to define social policy have not been very fruitful, partly because the boundary problems have not been overcome and partly because the definitions have not been capable of encompassing all the various social policy activities. 7) But on the other hand, others have raised the point that it is neither necessary nor possible
to define social policy as a distinctive discipline or a distinctive area of responsibility, because social policy is part of politics in general. As such, its activity is so integrated with other community phenomena that it is of little use to make it a distinct object for study.

**A Theoretical Framework**

As one of many approaches to achieving an improved understanding of what social welfare policy is and what it implies, it could be appropriate to take the concept of social distance as a point of departure and regard social policy as an attempt to influence social distance, through a redistribution of resources, in such a way that distance between and within given groups in society is reduced. Reduction of social distance must be seen as tied to the society's normative standards, the basic assumption being that an evaluating process takes place, which reformulates conceptions of resource equality to conceptions of social distance. Resource equality may be considered in various ways, but the more sociological realities of resource equality can be understood through analysis of its connection to social distance. Of course, certain resource inequalities are the immediate target for social policy efforts. But in order to understand better the processes that are connected to social policy activity, it seems important to regard social distance as a fundamental underlying variable. I believe it is largely this variable that people's attitudes about social policy are tied to. People's judgment about what constitutes an acceptable compromise with respect to the social distance between and within groups shapes the possibilities as well as sets the limits for social policy contributions.
If we imagine, for the sake of simplicity, two partners in social policy activity, namely *givers* and *receivers*, the efforts to reduce the social distance between the two, can be seen as a continuous game where the givers' conceptions of the extent of their own and others' social resources are confronted with the receivers' conceptions of the extent of their own and others' social resources. If this dynamic game somehow comes into equilibrium, the effort to reduce social distance is likely to cease.

This is not to point out specific giver groups and receiver groups. These can be whatever groups or even individuals who engage in activities, which reduce the social distance between them. Receivers can be traditional client groups or the so-called new client groups, or just well single individuals in a dyadic relationship where the giver, through an ordinary human relationship, tries to give the receiver "self confidence" or stimulation to utilize his or her own resources. The giver can be the tax-payers, or the neighborhood that accepts a home for alcoholics in its immediate surroundings, just as well as other groups or individuals who give out of their own resources in order to reduce the social distance to receivers.

Social resources here is defined as all the individual or structural qualities an individual or group possesses in order to maintain, improve, or control their own living conditions. At the individual level, important resources are education, health and position in the social network, for example. Aggregated to the group level, such and other resources will improve the group's chances of getting its own conceptions about its need for further resources more widely accepted. A social resource is whatever is defined by the society as useful, or what is convertible to something useful.
In sociological literature the concept **social distance** is connected with the degree of contact and intimacy that is allowed or acceptable between groups with different characteristics. The concept also is associated with the problem of stratification: If one looks at the positions that exist in the society, for individuals and for groups, there is a certain degree of prestige or rank connected with each. The socially defined difference between the prestige or rank of the various positions usually is called social distance.\(^{11}\)

In other words, social distance may be seen as something that comes out of a kind of mental matrix that people carry in their heads. This matrix corresponds to people's model of society as hierarchically arranged, and one can "walk into" this individual mental matrix, localize a particular cell, and read off the distance between, for example, individuals A and B, or between two categories of people described in terms of particular sets of socially relevant characteristics.

Research in social stratification indicates that people's mental distance matrices are rather clear and consistent. Of course, there must be certain systematic differences between groups of individuals with respect to which values they have "registered" in each specific cell in their matrices, and probably there are fields in the matrices that are rather diffuse for particular groups of people. But consider how the distance matrix is activated and utilized, for example, in connection with salary adjustments. It is not sufficient to uphold the rank order. Also, we invariably encounter clear requirements that even reciprocal distance between the groups be upheld.\(^{12}\)

We are trying to see social policy as interference with social distance. Social distance enters here as a comprehensive concept, in that it is tied through a social process to a wider spectrum of social resources.
than what is usually included in the concepts of prestige and rank. But prestige is a dominating dimension in the sense that it is highly correlated with the extent of other central resources.

A broad definition of social distance makes it possible to develop a wide perspective on social policy activity. One can, for example, include health policy as a part of social policy. Having good health is a resource, and in our terminology one may say that health policy has as its most important function the reduction of the distance between people who have good health and people who have poor health, by channelling social resources of various kinds to those who have poor health. In the same way, certain parts of educational policy have a social policy goal that starts with bringing the resource, education, to those who are in the weakest positions, or who are farthest from given norms about what minimum requirements should be set for the group's education.

Some Clarifications

In society there are different points of view regarding the question of which groups are most likely to become "social problems", and also different points of view about which deficiencies in the distribution of social resources shall be taken to indicate that we are faced with social problems. Often these two sets of opinions are so interwoven that they are difficult to distinguish analytically.

Figure 1 is a simple matrix that can help to clarify this problem. On the vertical axis are placed those groups that are traditionally regarded as especially exposed to social problems (group A), such as low income workers, single parents, and the handicapped, for example. Below are placed those groups that cut across the population and are not considered as especially exposed to the risk of becoming a social problem (group B). Such groups
could be youth between the ages of 15 and 18, the audience in the national theater, housewives in the home, et cetera. Along the horizontal axis are placed different social resources. These resources can be expressed in very general terms, for example, as health or working conditions, or they can be specified concretely, for example, as the conditions of one's feet, or as some measure of friendship among colleagues.

Within such a matrix it is possible to imagine how the various social resources are empirically distributed to each of the different groups. So far, little such empirical mapping has been done, but we have the beginnings in the Swedish low income study and in the Norwegian level of living study.13)
### Figure 1: Groups with greater or lesser risk of social problems, in relation to various social resource components.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups in society</th>
<th>Resource components</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$c_1$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>A. Greater problem risk</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>$a_1$</td>
<td>$(ac)_{11}$</td>
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<tr>
<td>$a_2$</td>
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<td>$a_3$</td>
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<td>$\ldots$</td>
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<tr>
<td>$a_n$</td>
<td>$(ac)_{n1}$</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>B. Lesser problem risk</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$b_1$</td>
<td>$(bc)_{11}$</td>
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<tr>
<td>$b_2$</td>
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<td>$b_3$</td>
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<tr>
<td>$\ldots$</td>
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<tr>
<td>$b_m$</td>
<td>$(bc)_{m1}$</td>
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</tbody>
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If one were to look at the concrete contents of the cells in the matrix, one would find in the population both conceptions of the assumed distributions within the individual cells, and to some extent quite strong if not uniform opinions on how the distributions ought to be. In particular, norms will be connected to the question of where the upper and lower boundaries of the distribution ought to lie.

The confrontation between these two "realities", the assumed and the prescribed, creates one of the greatest tensions in social policy. We also have seen examples of the tension that can arise when the assumed is confronted with the actual, as when the results of the Swedish low income study were published.14) It created considerably reaction when it was shown that the actual resource inequality between certain groups in the Swedish society was significantly larger than would be expected according to widespread assertions about the welfare state.

Let Figure 2 represent the frequency distribution in one of the cells in Figure 1, that is, the distribution of one of the social resources, $c_j$, in a given group, $a_i$. Let us imagine that according to official goals, this group's living conditions in terms of this resource shall not be below a given threshold, let us say $x$.15) To the extent the society really places high priority on this goal it will make attempts to move that part of the group which falls to the left of $x$ toward the right side of the distribution. Or put in another way, efforts will be made to reduce the social distance between the group's members, so as to give that part of the group which belongs to the left side of the distribution greater advantage with respect to these particular resources. Usually, the official goals will not include the setting of boundaries for the upper part of the distribution, so the group still may have widely different living conditions.16) Resources in the group may even become more unequally distributed through the process that is supposed to be giving more
advantage to the lower part of the distribution. For example it can be maintained that the efforts to make education available to larger groups on the elementary level have caused more educational differentiation in the society.\textsuperscript{17}

Figure 2. Hypothetical frequency distribution for a group with respect to one resource component.

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure2}
\caption{Hypothetical frequency distribution for a group with respect to one resource component.}
\end{figure}

Now, it is not only through official goals that norms relating to a group's living conditions are being established. Also there are informal community norms concerning this matter. Let us say that the average of these expectations is at \( y \), that is, the community as a whole wants to be more restrictive with help to this group than what is expressed through the official goals. Part of the official program will therefore be designed to create better understanding in the community, so that the norms allow movement of the threshold from \( y \) to \( x \). Thus, an adjustment of the threshold indirectly means an acceptance of less social distance, both within a given group and between this and other groups in the society.\textsuperscript{19}
Certain influential people or groups with recognized expertise may have norms that deviate strongly both from the official goals and from the average opinion in the community. Let us suppose their threshold is at \( z \). Assuming that the particular problem group's living conditions are a matter of concern to these opinion leaders or experts, they will work in the direction of bringing that part of the distribution to the left of \( z \) up to a level corresponding to \( z \). The work of these individuals and unofficial groups toward reducing the social distance between this and other particular groups will also be considered as social policy, according to our definition. This definition also applies where members of the problem group itself work actively to improve their position.

However, not only that part of the distribution which falls under a given threshold, that is, the distribution's left side, is the object of social policy efforts. It is also desirable to invest resources in that part of the group that is farther to the right in the distribution, to assure that they do not exhibit downward mobility and end up on the left side of the threshold. Such efforts are called preventive social work, and in the terminology used here, it means that social policy efforts are made to hinder further widening of the social distance between certain groups. Such preventive efforts will not be limited only to groups exposed to social problems, cf. group A in Figure 1, but also will be used across the population as well, cf. group B.

Another important form of social policy activity is that of pointing out problem-causing structures in the society and to make efforts to change them. This activity also has to do with redistribution of resources, carried out for example, through employment policies, and industrial
or regional development policies. Through these interventions, one hopes to prevent contraction of the resource potential for particular groups. In other words, one tries to reduce the probability of downward mobility for particular groups, and to see that the social distance does not increase between these and certain other groups in society.

According to what has been said so far, social policy has these three tasks:

1) To reduce social distance both within and between certain groups, through transfer of social resources in a broad sense.

2) To impede the widening of social distance both within and between certain groups, through preventive work.

3) To establish norms about how much social distance there should be within and between certain groups, through setting priorities and transferring social resources to defined problem groups.

In the following the concept of social distance and the interaction between norm-setting groups in social policymaking will be discussed in more detail.

**Resources and Distance.**

In Figure 2 we saw a simplified illustration of how one single resource component may be used in the manipulation of social distance. However, the concept of resource is complex, and as indicated in Figure 1, it needs decomposing in order to be analyzed. The critical question then becomes: How does one return to a synthesis after an analysis of components? The assumption here is that the underlying dimension of social distance can contribute to such a synthesis.
Some complications in the use of the concept of social resources lie in the following points. First of all, a listing of either total resources or of specific kinds of one resource could be continued for a long time, if not indefinitely. Secondly, the resource components are connected with different structural levels in the society. Some resources are predominantly individual: abilities, skills, health, appearance; but in many ways they are contingent on resources in the social milieu. Some resources are collective: those connected with families or households, voluntary or formal organizations, political structures, local communities, national communities. One resource can be gained with the help of another, but if enough resources are convertible, there are social and other restrictions on their exchange, as Coleman and others thoroughly have discussed. The concept of conversion of energy used by ecologists reminds us of how complex the chains are, and how they are socially bound, with great cultural variations.

Thirdly we have not made much progress so far in linking the components together into a theoretically compact system which, if we had it, could be used to predict and test system consequences of changes in particular components. It has been asserted that this is the main weakness in the development of social indicators, and that what we need is development of models of the sort that economists use. Of course, one difficult problem is the lack of a common standard for transposition of the single components. Another problem is that fixing the rate of exchange between resource components can occur only through a dynamic social process where people's shifting desires and goals are eventually made manifest.

Without going into any concrete empirical solutions here, one may point to the possibility of letting the relative weight of the single components be unveiled by the way they reflect the dimension social distance. The resource inequality that exists between individuals, or between
groups, gets its sociological meaning and content through the significance the community attaches to this inequality in the light of social distance. According to this view the concept of distance - insofar as it can be given an adequate mooring in data - will be useful to throw light upon the isolation of the single resource component as well as the optimization of the redistribution of resources that social policy is concerned with.

It is important to emphasize the interactional character of the concept of social distance. General stratification theory tells us that the question of which criteria shall be the basis for differentiation in rank or prestige, can be answered only with reference to the culture: culture determines through processes over which professionals still disagree. The social policy focus is the distribution of resources. As we have seen, we are dealing with complicated multiple resources and a continuous resource conversion, from component to component. When we, as here, depict social distance as a social deposit of differences in extent of resources, we are still entangled in cultural evaluations and the concept social distance may be understood only as the result of interaction between social partners.

The Norm-setting Process

Let us consider one of the columns in Figure 1. It concerns one resource component and its distribution among various groups. Each group may be characterized by some measure of control tendency as well as dispersion, and we have variation both within and between the groups. We have discussed, in connection with Figure 2, the activity that is directed toward establishing the lower boundaries of resources, symbolized by x, y or z. There is probably little reason to assume that the value of x, for example, on one resource scale, is constant for all the groups. It may be more reasonable to suppose that there
are different values for $x$, so that each group has its $x$-value. The relationship is indicated in Figure 3. The fact that $x$ cannot be seen as one fixed value is due to the fact that evaluation does not take place from above or from the outside according to autonomous criteria, but through a dynamic interaction among group members and between different groups having unequal powers to work towards the acceptance of their views. It is also likely that deviance within a group is defined in its context, so that a condition considered to reflect a lack of resources within one group would not necessarily be considered similarly in another group.

Figure 3: Hypothetical frequency distribution for four groups with respect to one resource component.
Considering here the problem of how one resource component is distributed in various groups, we also must be able to conceive of a situation where we have many groups as well as many different resource components. Within such complicated reality the conflicts of interest in social policy take place.

In the above a distinction was made between the "givers" and the "receivers" in the social policy field. It now becomes evident that the complex situation we are dealing with does not allow an unambiguous distinction between these two sets of partners. Since many resource components are at play at the same time, the givers in one situation will be the receiver in another. But the assumption here is that the game goes on within established boundaries, in that the social distance dimension provide an ordering principle and places the actors in a hierarchical pattern.

Conflicts of interest and tugs of war hardly are worked out only between those who wish to increase their resources, that is, client groups and receiver groups on the one side, and the rest of society on the other side. On the contrary, there is much evidence to indicate that those who have the fewest social resources also are those who have the least power to protest, so that a good deal of the effort to reduce distance is led by other groups on behalf of the receiver groups. It looks as if the strongest tug of war goes on between giver groups, that is, those who must tolerate, to varying degrees, a direct, indirect, or relative reduction in the extent of their social resources.²²)

Let us now look at some examples of how the manipulation of social distance works in a number of social programs.

If an individual deviates strongly enough from the norms of society, his behavior will call forth sanctions that aim either to force him over towards the acceptable or to punish him for his deviance. If the deviance is the kind that comes into conflict with enacted laws, imprisonment may be
the result. The punishment consists of restriction of freedom, which means among other things that the prisoner is put into a position where he cannot procure the resources that help to define his social position in the society at large. At the same time his confinement is stigmatizing, as his social position in his society becomes negatively affected by his imprisonment. Relative resource deprivation as well as downward mobility thus are components of the punishment. When the imprisonment is terminated there are social programs that begin when the ex-prisoner walks out through the prison gates. Ideally, it is important to get him back to the position he had before he went to prison, or in any case to better his present position, that is, to give him upward mobility. This can be achieved through helping him with a job or job-training, housing, clothes, improved self-respect, or in other words, by transferring sufficient social resources to him so that the social distance is reduced between him and those he uses as his reference group.

It is within the prison system that one most clearly sees the effect on social distance through stigmatizing. It is accepted in this sector, because deviance is defined as socially undesirable. But within social programs, which are designed to help people, we often find the same kinds of stigmatizing. We find it to varying degrees, we find it in individuals and built into the structures. It is there, working against the intentions of social policy to reduce social distance. One study shows how the receivers of social welfare benefits are so stigmatized by their neighbors, that one could ask whether the increase in social distance through stigmatization from the neighbors counter-balances the effect of the economic transfers from the social welfare office. Another study shows how single mothers are not very interested in contact with the social welfare office and the therapeutic support offered there,
but rather prefer to go back to a system with anonymous money transfers. 23)

In a study of the Norwegian Social Care Act, it was shown that those who administer the law also feel that they personally are affected by changes in clients' social position, and many of them were little willing to reduce the distance for the various types of clients through transfer of resources. 24)

Closing Remarks

Allardt has used Maslow's motivation theory to develop a classification scheme for social indicators, assuming that society as a system functions with the aim of satisfying human needs. He also has shown how in a functional analysis à la Stinchcombe one may see needs as homeostatic variables, factors that work through the social structure as tension variables and community allocation (for example, through social policy) as control variables. The definition of needs, or of tolerance boundaries for satisfaction of needs, are socially conditioned, and therefore must be made the subject of constant mapping. 25)

The possibility of pursuing another orientation is suggested here. It is believed that it may be useful to regard what comes out of the social distance matrix as social policy's homeostatic variables.

Many kinds of tensions would have the effect of changing the cell values in the distance matrix. But what happens when control variables are allowed to work is that the distance matrix is upheld to a great extent, and the solutions come to lie within a certain tolerance of movement. As have been mentioned, we even see that an increase of resources in the form of money, for example, can lead to stigmatizing from immediate neighbors that partly or completely counteracts the distance-reducing effect of the benefit. Much of the debate about alleged misuse of
national insurance programs also may be understood in this perspective. Of course, the content of the distance matrix is socially defined and constantly changing.

One may get the impression in the course of social policy debate that what we strive for is a distance matrix with the value zero in all cells, in other words, an egalitarian society. In reality a matrix with different values is practiced. It is an important task to increase our knowledge about what this matrix really looks like among the various groups involved in putting social policy goals into practice.
NOTES


5. Jørgen S. Dich, Socialpolitikkens Teori, 1. bind (København: Dansk Videnskabs Forlag, 1964), Ch. 1, especially p. 34.
6. Rold Andersen, op. cit., p. 27.


11. Svalastoga distinguishes between these two interpretations of social distance. The first one, which is related to intimacy and friendship, is called horizontal distance. The second one, which is related to stratification, is called vertical social distance. In accordance with Svalastoga it is here assumed that these two variants of social distance is interdependent and must be treated as such.


A review of different relations in which the concept of social distance has been used is found in Delbert C. Miller, Handbook of Research Design and Social Measurement (New York: McKay, 2nd ed., 1970) pp. 222-229, and

12. Torstein Eckhoff, *Justice. Its Determinance in Social Interaction* (Rotterdam University Press, 1974). Eckhoff discusses the importance of status and rank as one of several principles underlying the distribution of resources, Ch. 9. Included in our concept of social distance is also an evaluation of the distance between different positional ranks.


15. The official goal for a social program is not always stated very precisely, and the official goal is not necessarily the actual goal, see Else Øyen, *Sosialomsorgen og dens forvaltere. En sosialpolitisk undersøkelse* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1976), Ch. 3 and 10.

16. Taxation policies intend, of course, to counteract too much differentiation.

17. Gudmund Hernes, "Om ulikhetens reproduksjon", Arbeidsnotat nr. 28, Levekårsundersøkelsen.


24. Øyen, *op. cit.*, Ch. 9.
