

COMPETING REALITIES ON THE ARENA OF SOCIAL POLICY

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The practice of social policy measures is a difficult field to penetrate. We know very little of what is going on behind the fence of barbed wire and filigree made by complex distributional systems, bureaucratic organizations, principles of confidentiality, professional jargons, incongruent use of discretion, competing programmes and built-in moral and economic conflicts. We know that still more people are benefiting, whether they are on the distributing or receiving end of the line, but we do not know the extent of poverty and powerlessness. We know the details of the budgets of social expenditures, but know little of the redistributive effects of the system of economic transfers, let alone tax deductions. We know the administrative context for the decision-making process, but we know much less about the consequences of the many small decisions involved in the practice of social policy.

The information produced in the social policy apparatus gives a limited picture of the reality of social problems and the nature of social policy. The system is not constructed for the purpose of analyzing its own performance or producing systematic information about unmet needs or unsolved problems. The production of information is limited to administrative decision-making and is expressed in administrative terms where clients are defined in statistical categories and age cohorts and not as for example political subjects or consumers of leisure activities.

This is the prerogative of all administrators. The administration only needs certain information on which to base its decisions. But through this activity the administrative body is also given the power to determine the social reality of its clients. And being an authority in the field, it is implicitly given the power to transmit this limited "reality" to the public.

This power of constructing a reality for the clients, and social policy-making, is enhanced where there are no competing agents providing alternative realities.

In three projects of research into Norwegian social policy we have investigated alternative agents of reality construction in social policy and looked into how these realities have been received by the social policy apparatus.

Two of the studies survey the research literature on respectively the Norwegian Social Security Act of 1967 (1), and the Norwegian Social Care Act of 1965 (2). The third study is an analysis of the role of the Norwegian press in reporting on social policy issues (3).

In the study of the social security system, 187 research reports were surveyed, while the study of the social care system contained 349 research reports. The definition of research reports was fairly generously applied in order to capture as many approaches and insights as possible.

The main part of the research reports focuses on the functioning (and malfunctioning) of the social administration. Here we find both straight technical analyses and encompassing sociological analyses on the use of resources, effects of bureaucratization of service delivery, clarification of concepts, models for co-operation both within the administration and across administrative borders, pin-pointing of areas of conflict, exposure of vested interests and professional monopolies, inefficiency in use of expertise, barriers to information flows, inconsistency in decision-making, pros and cons in decentralization, faulty interpretations of legal provisions, etc. Many of the studies point directly to possible solutions. And most of the studies represent an insight which is different from the insights the administration has of its own functioning and relations with the external world, because of the different analytical tools used.

Some of the studies in the survey are evaluation studies which methodologically offer a systematic approach to data gathering in the social policy sphere.

Quite a few studies are on the needs and problems of special groups and the clients qua clients. The solutions offered from these studies vary from a larger transfer of resources to the specific groups researched, a different use of available resources, a different organizational setting, more information, a call for a different kind of expertise, to a new diagnosis of the situation. Most of these studies provide a different kind of reality than the one provided by the administration.

Some of the studies look at unintended consequences of specific social programmes, either in relation to the clients involved, other social groups, institutions or conditions.

Still another group of studies analyzes social programmes within the larger context of the welfare state, the political institutions, the family, etc. Here recommendations for change are made on the macro-level.

All this activity is a very persistent effort to construct a different social reality and put new issues on the agenda for social policy-making.

The social policy apparatus seems very ambivalent to this effort. The call for research and new information is strong on the verbal level, and some of the administration hopefully look to research for the many problems they are facing. The administration also finances a sizeable amount of research, including much of the research surveyed here.

But hardly any of the research results are transformed into administrative action.

This could of course be due to the quality of the research presented. Admittedly, some of the research reports are rather poor, methodologically as well as theoretically. Some of them are more political than analytical. Some are inconclusive. And some of the results cannot be implemented without violating basic social institutions and the ideology upon which the welfare state is built. But apart from this there is still some solid research left which can be taken seriously.

But the social policy apparatus has little skill in sorting out research. And it lacks institutionalized channels through which the research can be fed. There is no organized input for the research production, not even the one financed by the administration. Instead, the administration reacts in a quasi-rational way to the constant flow of research reports. It receives the reports, sometimes distributes a summary of the results, participates in seminars where the results are discussed, and uses bits and pieces of the reports, usually unquoted, in other contexts.

Of course, we may be facing a time-lag between the research production which by definition is up front, and the thorough corporate preparations for implementation which by definition are part of a democratic society. But then, some of the research results are by now 10 and 15 years old and the problems they focused on are still pertinent. Some changes have occurred, however. The social science vocabulary has moved into the official documents of the administration, as have some of the causal analyses of social problems. Some theoretical frameworks are also used, although in a version adapted to the administration's need for brevity. And social scientists are moving into the social policy-making arena in increasing numbers.

But we still have to ask how interested the social policy apparatus is in a different kind of reality. Much of the research presented can be interpreted as critical, i.e. it questions established practices and suggests changes which in themselves can be a threat to vested interests and built-in inertia of the system. The notion of change is based in the reality presented. But while the social policy apparatus may be favourable to the new reality, it may still want

to reject the changes implied in the reality. One response is a passive shelving of the research results, and in tacit understanding with the other non-actors of the system ask for time while initiating still more research.

For different reasons, the social scientists are as ambivalent, the research market being a buyer's market and the social policy apparatus the major wholesale dealer.

The study of the role of the press in social policy-making shows another agent of reality construction. Here we have looked into 46 case stories featured in the daily papers, describing a client and her/his difficulties in dealing with one or another social programme administration. The stories are richly equipped with the kind of personal details which are usually handled confidentially by the administration and often appear on the front page or as a major feature. The press in general is favourable towards the victims of social problems and several papers try to create a positive social policy image through the use of these stories. The social administration is often pictured as the harsh, and sometimes inhuman, obstacle to the justified demands of these people. The stories seem to be a Northern European welfare state phenomenon, as we have not found them elsewhere. Also we hardly see any antagonistic anti-client stories about misuse of social programmes, as we find them e.g. in Britain, France and the United States.

In the project we did first a content analysis of the 46 newspaper reports and the follow-up articles. Then we interviewed the journalists who had written the reports, the people written about, and employees and others responsible for the cases in the different social administrations. Finally we went through the archives relevant for the cases in the different social administrations.

The analysis shows that the social reality the newspapers give of the clients' lives and difficulties is true on one level: The majority of the people were satisfied with the way they had been portrayed in the papers and only few said they would never expose themselves again. The internal controls of the press must be strong, because on the whole both the clients **and** the administration being exposed verified the contents of the reports. We had expected that people would feel stigmatized by having to reveal in public incidents from their lives which are usually hidden in the private sphere. But apparently this was not the case.

The representativeness of the stories can be questioned. The role of the journalist is such that most of them are passive receivers of these case stories. They sort out what comes on the desk but do not actively engage in finding representative stories. The result is that (a) resourceful clients seek out the press and use it strategically for certain purposes; (b) intermediaries use the

press on behalf of their organizations or interests; and (c) less resourceful clients come to the press with very personal and individualized problems. This only reflects that the competition for alternative realities is strong. The press is not aware of this pattern and presents it all as the "real life of a client in the welfare state."

The content analysis confirms this picture. The realities presented are incoherent and there is no consistency in the conclusions or recommendations in the stories or the editorials. Somehow the purpose gets lost in the highly dramatized and individualized stories, and it is not possible to deduce a social policy profile from the individual papers. But the main purpose is of course to sell the papers. There is an enormous interest for these stories, which have been coined "social pornography." Why this is so we do not know for sure. We can only say that the learning value of these "one-eyed" reports must be considerable.

The stated purpose of the press is to help the clients change their life situations by putting pressure on the social administrations. The press is not only offering a different reality to the administration, it also wants administrative action. This is part of the bait for inviting people to present their cases in the paper. The reaction of the social policy apparatus is not very dramatic. Some of the intermediaries are actually administrators who themselves have taken action on behalf of their clients by contacting the press. Most of the administrators acknowledge that the press reports are true. But add that only half the truth is told, as the details of the decisions cannot be exposed by the administration. Many feel uncomfortable about being written about in the press, but the decision-making is largely unaffected. No major gains and only a few minor gains are obtained by those who have had their life stories written in the papers.

Maybe the morale of the story is that the press and the researchers ought to join forces and virtues in order to present and sell a different reality of the social policy arena.

Or maybe the morale of the story is that the social policy apparatus offers all the symptoms of a well-established welfare state which is satisfied with a solid backing from the public and not likely to budge, neither to pressure nor to competing realities. This is a point of view which may be considered disappointing to press and researchers. But then, it can be considered a diagnosis of health when economic recession threatens established welfare rights.

FOOTNOTES

- (1) Gundersen, Håkon and Else Oyen: "Trygd i Norge. En kommentert litteratur-oversikt", Oslo, Universitetsforlaget, 1980.
- (2) Forsund, Hildegunn M. and Else Oyen: "Stevnemote med sosialomsorgen. En beskrivende bibliografi", Oslo, Universitetsforlaget, 1983.
- (3) Puijk, Roel, Helge Ostbye and Else Oyen: "Sosialpolitikk eller sosialporno-grafi? Sosialpolitiske reportasjer i pressen", Oslo, Universitetsforlaget, 1984 (forthcoming).