Social Work and Social Policy

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The relationship between social policy and social work can on no account be considered clarified. This is because it has not been empirically examined in depth, and also because both the state and social policy in social work theorizing have neglected it. A discourse analysis can be used, in an attempt to examine this relationship further.

Social Policy

The dimensions to relevance to social work practice are for Jonathan Dickens (2010): Sometimes, the bigger picture can seem too daunting, and it is more satisfying to stick to the interpersonal aspects of practice; or the routines and procedures of everyday work can seem too much, and it is easier to concentrate on just getting them done. Certainly, relationships with service users and organisational competence are both crucial and social workers will fail in their duties to services users if they are not skilled in these. But understanding the policy context is for Dickens (2010) also crucial, in three ways.

"First, because major features of social work epitomise some of the major themes in social policy, notably about the importance of responsive, preventive services, about listening to and empowering service users, about flexible inter-professional working, about standards, accountability and budgets.
Second, because an awareness of the policy picture is vital if social work is not just to be on the receiving end of these policies, responding all the time to an agenda set by others, implementing plans drawn up by people far removed from the realities of front-line practice. Social workers, and other social professionals, can influence policy, but to do so they need to ensure that they are aware of what is going on, and are thinking beyond, or behind, their casework – an often-used image is that they should be looking `upstream`.
The third reason is that what social workers do is the reality of social policy for the people they work with. For service users, all the policies in the world are little use unless they are put into practice by social work by social workers and other front-line public service workers (Lipsky 1980, who uses the term `street-level bureaucrats`). And, as Lipsky point out, things are more dynamic and subtle than simply `putting policy into practice`, because the reality of policy is made by everyday practice – by the way laws and procedures are interpreted and applied, through routines and shortcuts, rule-breaking, strict action sometimes and leniency at others, doing extra work in some cases and not in others. In other words, social workers do not just implement policy; in a sense they create it as they go" (Dickens 2010: 2).

Moroney (1991) describes Policy as a process of decision-making. Policy is primarily concerned with decision making and choosing among alternative courses of action. Choices have to be made among competing claims for resources, each of which may be reasonable or at least be perceived as reasonable by some group. Social Policy might involve the question of allocating resources between social problems. To complicate this decision-making or choice process even further, we are also faced with issues involving the future.

Choices also have to be made between proposed implementation strategies once a goal has been established.

Policy formulation, then, involves a process of decision-making that results in selecting a course of action. It is a dynamic activity that is open to modification when conditions change. The products of policy (e.g., law, a set of regulations, or a judicial statemant) are also subject to modification over time for the same reasons. "Policy, therefore, is a fairly stable but potentially changeable statement of a desired end or goal" (Moroney 1991: 2).

Policy formulation begins for Moroney (1991) with the following:

- The definition of the problem;
- The presentation of relevant information;
- A critical appraisal of the dynamics of underlying issue, and
- Working through the implications of various courses of action.

Analysis, the cornerstone of policy process, begins with description. This descriptive function raises a variety of questions from a range of sources and, to the extent possible, ensure a balanced perspective. Analysis clarifies and sharpens the discussion. This does not mean, however, that the analysis is value neutral or value free.

Moroney addresses four main questions:

Policymakers label a condition or situation as a „problem" to be corrected or, in some instances, as a source of future problems. We are using the term problem in specific way: as a condition that needs addressing, one on which action will be taken. This labeling is based in part on the analysis and in part on the beliefs and values of the policymakers. At this point in the process we have shifted from a purely descriptive/analytic set of activities to one that integrates both descriptive and normative aspects or dimensions – one that addresses the question of what should be done.

When sufficient consensus is reached by the policymakers and political preferences have emerged, short- and long-range strategies need to be developed. These are often shaped by the existing state of knowledge and technology, the availability of resources, and political feasibility. The question now shifts from what should be done to what can be done.

Since so many so-called experts disagree on ways to solve complex social problems, we are usually confronted with choosing among alternative solutions. Procedures are required to weigh carefully each proposal – procedures that are grounded in competing and often contradictory values. This marks the question what must be done.

Finally, policy is concerned with implementation issues. These include questions of coverage, financing, administrative structures, personnel requirements, and the roles of public and private sectors. This marks the question by whom should it be done.

The policy process, then, is a blend of fact and preference. The participants in this process include policymakers, policy analysts, policy implementers like social workers, and policy influencers or special-interest groups advocating specific actors.

Moroney (1991) has defined public policy as a process of making choices among competing demands, especially when there are scarce resources. In making these choices, decisionmakers either implicitly or explicity rely on values. The policy process has been identified as a set of activities addressing four basic questions. While the first question (What should be done when confronted with a situation that has been labeled a problem?) is clearly normative, the other three also have value dimensions. Rationales for government interventions were then introduced, followed by a discussion of the locus of authority and responsibility.

Discourse analysis: Positioning in listening
A theoretical framework to relate social policy and social work can be – like Daniel Wrana (2006) describes – the theory of social and discursive practice. Practices in general are seen as actions. They are activities that are repeatable, regular, and recognizable in a given cultural context. The notion of discourse refers to the work of Michel Foucault. Normally it is used in a double sense as a short form „discoursive formations" and „discoursive practice". In the reception of Foucault, the focus is often on the „discoursive formations" which are relatively stable discoursive practices in a given field and time. But the focus can be – however – on discoursive practice and its heterogeneity especially in everyday practice of Social Workers. For Foucault discoursive practice constitutes truth. The truth of science for example or the truth of subjectivity. The question of discourse analysis is: how – in which practices, by which mechanisms and technologies – is truth made truth. Foucault is the first developing the idea that the discoursive practice provides subject positions.

Now – Foucault explores the problem of speaking, but he seldomly looks on the problem of listening or reading. So discoursive practice seems to be a wide field where everybody produces discourse but nobody receives. The problem of reception is addressed by thinkers like Louis Althusser, Umberto Eco, Judith Butler and Stuart Hall. The central notion here is the act of „listening", these acts are also a discoursive practice, they are a kind of second production. We only can observe them when they are uttered again.

There is a basic rupture in in every reception, because the utterance is full of openings and a listener needs knowledge to fill it up to make sense. So a listening is generated by combining several discourses as resources to understand an utterance which is a complex and heteronomous process of decoding.

To see policy implementers, which social workers are, as listeners refers to the question which knowledge do they use to fill up the gaps to make sense of the specific situation of the clients? How is this knowledge related to the knowledge of policymakers? And is the hegemony in purpose of Laclau and Mouffe discernible?

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