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Stigma, Small Communities & Local Welfare Bureaucracies

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Introduction

In this paper I would like to discuss some problems facing the clients of welfare bureaucracies in rather small communities. The discussion is based upon data from a research project on this topic, as well as assumptions based on theory.

In the mentioned research project two coastal communities in western and northern part of Norway have been studied. These communities have relatively few inhabitants. In one of the communities the population is just above 2000 inhabitants, and in the other community we are talking about a population around 6000 inhabitants. This means that the communities probably are of a transparent kind, and therefore the possibilities for conducting widespread social control is fairly high. The communities are dominated by jobs connected to fish industry and shipbuilding. Both communities have what might be called a traditionally rooted work ethic connected to physical work in the industries.

In the research project we have studied youth that gets into contact with the Social Welfare Office¹, the Local Employment Office² as well as the Social Security Office³. We have interviewed lone welfare mothers and youth, which have problems getting a job. We have also interviewed young workers, older workers, and parents with middleclass background as well as the representatives of the local welfare bureaucracies. We have conducted about 100 interviews.

Formulating the Problem

Official doctrine formulated at the governmental level states that the welfare bureaucracies and their programmes are legitimate, empowering and mainly positive contributions towards people with different kinds of social problems. Using the welfare system is looked upon as a turning point for people with such problems.

On the other hand; research focusing on the individual interpretation of being a welfare client in small and transparent social settings draws a different picture (see for example Heggen, Jørgensen & Paulgård 1999, 2003). Status as a welfare client is often viewed in a negative manner, and it is questioned whether becoming a client is a token of a new and positive process in the client's lives. This means that there could be a conflict between policy intentions at state level and the interpretation of them at the local level.

Theoretically it is argued that the concepts of marginalisation and stigma might be illuminating as well as the theory of street-level bureaucracy. The problem at focus in this paper can be formulated like this:

Becoming a client of the local welfare bureaucracies: will this evoke the feeling of stigma?

I am focusing on how the clients view this problem, but other groups' attitudes are of course also of importance.

¹ Sosialkontoret

² Aetat

³ Trygdekontoret

Important Features of the Norwegian Welfare Policy

After 1945 Norway have established a encompassing welfare state. This means the dominant position of social security that benefits all citizens that have been at work and thereby gains financial support by the state. Generous programmes have been established in general, but also for lone mothers and youth that have problems getting jobs. In addition to the universalistic programmes connected to the Social Security Office, there also has been established the final “safety net” – the social services, which are administered by the Social Welfare Office. These services are characterised as being administered by the municipalities, allowing social workers a fairly high degree of discretion towards their clients.

Right-wing and popular criticism of the welfare state have for decades been that the welfare state is *too* generous, and really not demanded much from their clients. Most of this kind of criticism seems to be connected to the social services, which have been “accused” of granting financial support to clients without demanding much in return. A similar criticism has in the past been directed towards lone mothers – a critique mainly carried out by the right-wing political party *Fremskrittspartiet*.

The research project has been carried out at a time in history where major changes in the welfare policy have occurred. From the beginning of the 1990`s there has in Norway been the gradual implementation of what has been called “arbeidslinjen” (“the workfare”) (Stortingsmelding nr. 35:1994-95). The main ideological content of this is that support from the welfare state to a greater extent than before should encourage clients to pursue higher education and\ or enable them to qualify for the labour market and thus avoid social exclusion. It became an important goal to avoid a permanent client status, especially for young people. Periods of financial support where made shorter. This was a reform with significant impact on lone mothers. Until 1998 they could receive support from the state for a period of 10 years (transitional support). After 1998 this period was reduced to 3 years, but with the possibility of receiving two years of additional support if the client pursued an educational programme.

Another element of the workfare was to limit the possibilities to be defined into a permanent and non-productive client position, for instance in the matter of the disability pension. A third element was that the welfare bureaucracies could demand more of the clients than before. The Social Welfare Office could for instance demand (“vilkår”) clients to perform work in exchange for financial support. Probably this possibility encompasses an ambiguity. On one hand it would show that clients are contributing to society, but on the other it could also reveal client status in an unfortunate way. Generally the welfare bureaucracies, as part of the workfare, were supposed to change their role focus towards the clients. It became an important part of the role of the professionals to encourage the clients for change – motivating them to pursue higher education and / or prepare them for permanent jobs. It became a goal to have motivational talks with the clients by establishing organisational routines.

An important point to make from the implementation, or at least the idea, of the workfare is that clients can or will be met by demands from the local welfare bureaucracies to avoid permanent client status.

Social Roles and the “Youth”-Roles of the Norwegian Welfare State

An important concept in this analysis is the concept of social role (see for example Merton 1957). Lone mothers and unemployed youth probably hold a variety of roles. A social role means expectations of a normative kind, from oneself and others in the society towards that role. Expectations may differ towards one single role (such as “lone welfare mother”), and the person may be judged according to other roles he or she holds. It may for instance be of importance if the lone welfare mother also is an employee or an idle drug addict. I think the problem at focus in this paper has a lot to do with differing notions of the definition of client roles, and what other roles the clients are (perceived as) holding.

As mentioned above the client roles at focus in this paper are embedded with the expectations of duality. To receive support from the state the clients are supposed to give something in return. I shall briefly mention what kind of support lone mothers and unemployed youth are likely to receive from the local welfare bureaucracies. Lone mothers may receive financial support from the Social Security Office; transitional grants, educational grants as well as economic funding to pay for someone to look after their child(ren). The Social Security Office may also advise lone mothers on qualifying for jobs. The Local Employment Office can also give counselling concerning this matter. Social services may assist lone mothers getting relief in connection with rearing children; for instance evaluate the need for a weekend home for the child. Getting transitional support from the Social Security Office presupposes client status at the Local Employment Office; thus showing interest for getting a job.

The young and unemployed may receive monetary funding while unable to work (“sykepenger”) from the Social Security Office provided one is defined unfit to work by medical expertise. The Local Employment Office may help the client to map their field of occupational interest and find placements for work. The Social Welfare Office may help by offering financial support. This can, according to the law be done in different ways: in the form of contributions, loans or goods and services. Social services may also find temporary housing for the client. If the client is a drug addict, then the social services may direct the client towards a “drug-team” which is linked up with a hospital located regionally.

The Importance of Small Communities

National policy can be defined as socially and culturally “blind”. At state level one are thinking of statistical categories and the nation as a whole, but when one looks at specific communities one find people or actors, who know each other and their life stories. Further the communities might have culturally defined values that interpret client status in a certain way. An expression of this is the terms people are using to define clients. At national level one might talk about “the long-term unemployed”, at the local level this may be translated as “the lazy guy”. Issues, which may be viewed as complex social problems at the policy formulating state level, may in small transparent communities be defined according to personal characteristics and even be reduced to properties such as idleness or family background. Even the role of local welfare bureaucracies may be looked differently upon in different local settings. I think that the problem has to be analysed on the background of the local context.

The Concept of Marginalisation

The main focus of this paper is to discuss if becoming a client in a local setting leads to stigmatisation. Before I explore the concept of stigma I want to investigate into the concept of marginalisation. My assumption is that the chance of experiencing stigma increases if one at the same time is marginalised or into a heavy process of marginalisation.

Marginalisation can be seen as a process where the individual is directed towards the margins of society (Park 1967). This means that the person will be defined as an outsider compared to the vast majority. The individual may drift into sub-criminal social groups or even become socially isolated. Heggen, Jørgensen and Paulgård (1999, 2003) found it fruitful to look at four arenas where the individual might experience inclusion or marginalisation. One arena is the family. The person who is experiencing heavy conflicts, violence, a remote parent or sheer parental neglect during childhood may get a bad start in life which later becomes a problem for him. The second arena is the school. Youngsters that drop out of school, experiences harassment while attending school etc. may have less potential for further studies and integration on the labour market. A third arena is connected to affiliation with local sports- or youth clubs. Those who do not participate or drop out of such clubs are not integrated into the local hegemonic culture, and may be looked upon as outsiders. Finally there is the work arena. If one have little experience from working as a youngster, maybe in combination with the lack of permanent jobs later in life – then there is the danger of becoming excluded from the labour market. Those who fall behind in all four arenas are most likely to be the ones who will experience the biggest problems.

To make this point clear: the experience of lone mothers and unemployed youth with the potentially stigmatised role as a welfare client, is expected to be related to whether they can be defined as “marginalised” or not.

The Concept of Stigma

At this point I may already reveal that the fieldwork data shows rather negative attitudes towards becoming a client, especially when we are speaking of unemployed youth. Welfare mothers seem to be receiving more positive attitudes (see also Wilhelmsen 2001).

I think that the concept of stigma might be fruitful to help explore the problem a step further. Marginalisation directs our attention towards processes that might create severe social problems for people. Stigma on the other hand may be seen as a fruitful concept when one want to explore how persons that are experiencing severe social problems are looked upon by others.

The concept of stigma is often defined according to Coffman’s well-known typology (Goffman 1963). In his book from the 1960` he defined stigma as something that sticks to the individuals personality. It is a negative label put on the individual by others. According to Goffman there are three forms, or reasons, for stigma. There is the physical kind of stigma. This means the labelling of persons having some kind of visible physical defect. People have negative feelings or attitudes towards individuals with different kinds of handicappes or bodily deformation. Then there is the kind of stigma, which sticks to a person because of their negative personality, or “weak will”. This kind of stigma concerns categories such as drug addicts, prisoners, mentally ill and the (long term) unemployed. This kind of stigma is of great interest for our discussion. Then there is the third form of stigma, which Goffman called the tribal stigma. This is the situation where the individual is not looked upon primarily as an individual in his own right, but belonging to a social category, which the society at large hold, negative attitudes towards. Ethnic minority groups of any kind serve as examples of this form of stigma. This is also of interest for our discussion since the individual client not only may be

judged by society on an individual basis but also as a “member” of a stigmatised and stereotyped category; “he is one of the clients”.

Another important issue in Goffmans book was that people with a stigmatised personality have some possibilities to deal with their situation. They can hide or cover up their identity or they can definitely try to deal with the problem by moving to another social setting. Goffmans viewpoints are interesting. However one might wonder how much of this applies to rather small communities. Life stories, behaviour and client status can be widely known locally and thus difficult to cover-up.

So far I have tried to point at one important issue: the problems that finally activates client status will probably be connected to negative judgements. One is having a problem because one is lacking strength, because one is lazy and because one is responsible for the problems oneself. Then there is something else: being a marginalised person means that people at large looks upon the client as a non-contributor. The client have not had any real jobs and thus not contributed to the society. The non-contributor is breaking a common human “law” – the law of reciprocity: It is OK to receive help if you also in the past have contributed to society, or if it is probable that you will give something back to society in the future.

Then there is theory on stigma that is closely linked to the field of social policy. Spicker (1984) has formulated the following situations or reasons for stigma being connected to social policy and its apparatus: the welfare bureaucracies.

One thing is that the client might feel embarrassment connected to the interaction with the welfare bureaucracies. One might look upon the interaction with the bureaucrats as difficult, maybe because one has to tell ones life story over and over again. Then one feels that becoming a client is an intervention in the private sphere of life.

Another thing is that social services practicing discretion evokes the feeling of stigma in the client. One cannot always demand services with reference to laws and clear-cut rights. Sometimes one is in the hands of the welfare bureaucrat who decide the outcome of applications with reference to an uncertain professional or even personal based discretion (Terum 1997, Eriksen 2001).

Then there is the problem of labelling. The society, mainly the community we are living in, view client status as a token of the division between “them and us”. This has also to do with the design of social policy. Services or programmes, which are in the shape of particularism, have the effect of revealing the gap between “them and us”. Special programmes or services which otherwise applies only to a minority of the population has this effect.

The Concept of Street-Level Bureaucracy

Lipsky (1980) has formulated a theory with relevance to the study of welfare bureaucracies. Lipskys theory is focusing on the relationship between the welfare bureaucrats and the rest of the organisation as well as the clients and the larger society.

Welfare bureaucracies are judged by society. In organisation theory someone once stated that organizations sometime experience “hostile environments”. One important impression from the research project is that is seldom that the informants held positive judgements of the welfare bureaucracies, especially when we are speaking of the social services. Youth that receives a client status at this office is mainly looked upon as getting unjust monetary funding from the welfare system.

As already mentioned clients can experience problems connected to the interaction with the welfare bureaucrats. It is an important aspect of street-level bureaucracy to practice a

high degree of discretion. This also means that the attitudes and behaviour of the individual bureaucrat is important for the experience the clients get from contact with such organisations. When clients are facing criticism and so on from the bureaucrats this might be looked upon as stigmatising seen from the perspective of the client. Lipsky states that the clients of street-level bureaucracies have nonvoluntary clients in a legal or structural sense. Lipsky also stress that such bureaucracies may impose psychological costs on clients related to an unfortunate life situation or embarrassment. Coping with a rather high amount of clients leads to rationing of information concerning rules and services, and organisational traits like turnover may evoke a feeling of stress within the clients. Street-level bureaucrats may have their own personal agenda regarding clients. Although the general policy is to help all clients, the street-level bureaucrat may focus on those he consider as having a good potential for change. Some clients may be looked upon as “hopeless cases” and given less priority.

Stigma can be seen as the consequence of stereotypes. Such stereotypes (connecting an individual to “a tribe”) can be experienced when society make general evaluations of clients. In fact there are mechanisms inside street-level bureaucracies that promotes similar stigmatisation, as well. Organizations offer their employees stressful work conditions, which lead to stereotyped definitions of the client. This means that the impression of the individual as a person with a unique background, special problems and resources is lost when they are transformed from individuals to clients: The lone mother Lisa is evaluated as part of the category of “lone welfare mothers”. An important thing here is that the client might want to be evaluated and met as an individual and not to be associated with a category of people he does not identify himself with. In this way the routinisation and stereotyping can lead to stigmatisation.

One important aspect of Lipskys theory is that street-level bureaucracies develop formal and informal coping-strategies to get the job done. Some of these may lead to the experience of stigma.

To be able to cope such bureaucracies use referrals of clients to other street-level bureaucracies. The consequence of this practice is that the client (and maybe also the public) experience that there is no real progress or solution to the problems. Clients may experience to be shuffled back and forth between different agencies.

Lipsky pointed at the practice described as “rubber stamping”. This means that one street-level bureaucracy uses the reports and evaluations on clients made by another agencies. Such reports and judgements may be based on insufficient and biased information. This may lead to a secondary form of stigmatisation carried out by the street-level bureaucracies; i.e. using the others prejudices when evaluating the client.

Partly as a coping strategy street-level bureaucracies establish physical structures to deal with clients. The line and the waiting room are examples of such structures. One important feature of this is the exposure of client status. Clients are not allowed full “privacy” when they seek help at the local welfare bureaucracies. Even the buildings can be located in such a way that client status is revealed in a burdensome way.

A thing to remember when we are speaking of welfare bureaucracies operating in small communities is this: The individual bureaucrat may sometimes have prior knowledge of the client. The bureaucrat may know him from childhood and so on. This might be a problem in some instances. Sometimes it may evoke the feeling of shame.

Empirical Findings: “The Fjord” and “The Bay”

I shall now turn to the empirical findings from our research, which has been carried out in two coastal communities nicknamed “the Fjord” and “the Bay”. It would be possible to focus on the differences between the communities as the main thing, but I shall in this paper rather focus on the difference between a national policy and the way this is understood in a local context – drawing on the experiences from the two communities.

“*The Fjord*” is the smallest community of the two. It has less than 3000 inhabitants. The community is isolated from other communities and the commercial centre of the municipality is very concentrated and indeed the only centre as well. There is just one main street, where the welfare bureaucracies are located, and this leaves you with the impression that the society in many ways can be viewed as transparent, and thus allowing its inhabitants with the possibility to conduct widespread social control. The fish-industry has been, and still is, the dominant industry in “the Fjord”. This means that there has for ages been a work ethic in this society which encourages people to work in manual labour. The will to work has been a major local value, and something, which has degraded the value of doing well at school. Save for shorter periods of production stops in the fish industry, the general picture has been that those who want a job in this society easily may get one. The traditional way of showing interest in getting a job is by taking direct contact with the firms, and not by going through the Local Employment Office. Christian values are not very deep rooted in this community and the number of lone mothers has for years been over the average. The local welfare bureaucracies are characterised by having few employed and sometimes lacking personnel. The Social Welfare Office has experienced this lately, which has resulted in reduced opening hours – or the rationing of services as Lipsky (1980) would have said.

“*The Bay*” is larger than “The Fjord” since the population is just below 7000 inhabitants. Unlike “the Fjord” this municipality has a less concentrated population, with widely scattered neighbourhoods in addition to the municipal centre. “The Bay” is also part of a region. Four municipalities form a functional region. Generally this leaves you with the impression that “the Bay” is less transparent than “the Fjord”, thus having less potential for conducting widespread social control. Traditionally “the Bay” has been known for its shipbuilding industries, and the work ethic that is associated with this kind of work. The value of working hard is a central local norm, either one speaks of “blue collar” or “white collar” work. The work ethic seems to go well a long with the value of studying. Unlike “the Fjord” it seems to have a fairly high status to pursue a career as a student in this society.

Past generations of entrepreneurs have been well rooted in the society, and not really shown of their wealth. In recent times this picture has changed a bit. Today some of the upper class tend to display their wealth more than before (big houses and expensive cars as symbols of this). The society is an affluent one, but people do not have equal economic possibilities. Having incomes below the average may be a problem in a society where the pressure to “keep up with the Joneses” is fairly high. Just like “the Fjord” there seems to be a notion among the locals that you can easily get a job if you really want. At the same time one may experience shorter periods with unemployment when the shipbuilding industry is lacking contracts. On the other hand this seems not to lead to a very high amount of clients of the welfare bureaucracies, especially not the social services. One important thing about the temporary economic problems is that they mainly will be viewed as imposed upon the individual from forces “outside”; leaving the individual free from responsibility for the situation.

Traditionally Christian values and movements have had a strong position in this society, but it seems to be more liberal values concerning moral issues now than in earlier times.

The local welfare bureaucracies are not so visible as they are in “the Fjord”, since the municipal centre in “the Bay” is more complex (more houses and streets and so on). As organisations they seem to be more complex than in “the Fjord”; more personnel and a more advanced organisational structure. The welfare bureaucracies in “the Bay” have experienced few turnover problems among their personnel.

The Lone Mothers

In both societies lone mothers receiving economic support from the Social Security Office were interviewed. A general picture in both municipalities is that the lone mothers in our material do not differ much from the population at large. Generally they are not considered as being marginalised or into processes of marginalisation. They seem to have normal experiences from childhood and the school system. One important point to make about the lone mothers is that they are at work and/or taking on further education. Another important aspect is that they seem not to be engaged in the use of drugs, and normally there is only one father of their children. This leaves the impression that there is little moral criticism towards the lone mothers locally. They feel accepted in their role, and the interviews with the other informants give the impression that lone mothers are accepted in the society. Some of the “other” informants state that lone mothers should receive financial support by the state apparatus almost unconditionally; while others stress that such support should to a high degree be connected to (preparation for) work.

Normally lone mothers have contact with the Social Security Office only. They normally have little experience with the social services. Some say that they would hesitate to use the social services because doing so is perceived as shameful. Generally lone mothers stories about the Social Security Office gives the impression that this welfare bureaucracy is seen as a “normal” institution to interact with – since almost everyone during their lives gets in contact with the Social Security Office. The interaction as such is often seen as “simple” or uncomplicated, something that means a low level of intervention into the lives of the clients from the street-level bureaucrats. Sometimes though, some of the lone mothers report that it may be difficult to interact with the bureaucrats because some of them give the clients a feeling that they own the means of administration (i.e.: the money) and therefore it feels like begging to ask for support. When this occurs, the lone mothers state that this is a situation marked with embarrassment. Some of the lone mothers also report that the quality concerning counselling (directing them towards educational programmes and occupations) sometimes is too low. This could indicate that some of the clients regard the qualifying capabilities of the Social Security Office to be less than wished for.

The Young and Unemployed

In “the Fjord” the interviews with informants in this category showed to be persons with lesser problems, such as physical plagues and unstable relations with the job-market. In “the Bay” however, we got in touch with young persons that seemed to have long term and severe social problems, as well. Some of the informants in “the Bay” have experienced a spoiled childhood, been out of work for a very long time and some of them have been drug addicts for years.

If we look at the client’s own stories; it seems like having contact with social services is a special case compared to the two other welfare bureaucracies. Getting in touch with social services seems to imply crossing a threshold, which alters your identity. Some of the informants clearly state that this means to be in a shameful situation, and one wonders how other people in the community react upon it. Anyway, the clients also state that they can not afford not being a client, because of material reasons. Indeed some of the clients state that they do not care about the client status as such. This could imply that there is nuances in the

way clients perceive their role. For instance some of the clients says that it is of importance what kind of attitudes that are prevalent within their network (family and friends).

The interaction with the social services seems to be by far the most challenging one for the young and unemployed. The prevalent use of discretion leads to a feeling of intervention into the personal sphere of the clients. This is a problem in its own right, but seems to be linked to the turnover of personnel within the organisation. This leads to the repetition of personal stories by the clients; and this is reported to be a burden. Interaction with the Social Security Office and the Local Employment Office seems to be of a less complex and more predictable kind. This leads to a less problematic relationship between the clients and the welfare bureaucracies. The Social Security Office and the Local Employment Office may be critiqued by some of the clients due to lack of information and “personal service”, but unlike social services there seem not to be embarrassment attached to these two welfare bureaucracies.

The clients in “the Fjord” and “the Bay” have some critical comments on how the local welfare bureaucracies function, which can directly and indirectly be related to the discussion in this paper. Sometimes for instance the Social Welfare Office may find arrangements, which either upset the popular notion on the level of help that is reasonable to get as a client, or which heavily displays client status. Some reacts upon the practice of housing young clients with older drug addicts. This also gives little hope for improving the life situation of the young client. Some of the clients spoke of experiences connected to referrals. For instance when the social services had directed them to institutions dealing with youngsters with special needs. Attending such institutions was not a good experience, and when one got back to the community people tended to look down on you; because one where labelled as a deviant.

Another criticism is that the local welfare bureaucracies seem not to be good enough when it comes to counselling or help clients to move on into educational programmes or qualify for jobs. Some of the clients state that they in addition wish the welfare bureaucracies would demand more of them in this respect.

I shall now turn to how the young and unemployed are looked upon by the other informants. There are similarities between “the Fjord” and “the Bay” in this respect, but also most clearly some differences.

Generally the middleclass parents and some of the older workers in “the Bay” seems to have more of a “liberal” or even “intellectual” approach in evaluating the young clients. In both communities though, it seems fairly right to say that becoming a client with the social services is mainly looked down on. One might have economic problems at times, but they should be solved without the assistance of the social services. People who are working in “the Fjord” have so much pride, and they do not allow themselves to seek for help at the Social Welfare Office.

Especially in “the Fjord” this status also is seen as a proof of being uninterested in getting a job. The problem is labelled as “laziness”. Many of the informants look upon the role as a young client with the social services to be “unnecessary” – you just have to do one thing to avoid this; work! As mentioned above, some of the informants in “the Bay” tend to look upon this status as being a result of complex social problems accumulated over years. This is more in line with the way clients themselves and the street-level bureaucrats perceive the clients.

Being a client with the Local Employment Office seems to be judged differently in “the Fjord” compared to “the Bay”. In “the Bay” it seems to be few negative attitudes towards this. In “the Fjord”, on the other hand many informants state that this form of client status is a negative one. Showing the will to work is done by establishing direct contact with the firms

on an individual basis, not by going via the Local Employment Office. The clientele there is seen as long term unemployed persons almost unable to perform work at all.

What about becoming a young client with the Social Security Office? The relevant services here would be rehabilitation programmes connected to problems of a physical character – facing some of the workers in the fish industries and the shipbuilding industries. In severe cases disability pension could be considered. The key to understand how this role is looked upon is connected to the problem of *knowledge* of the client's real or medical situation. If there is no doubt about the situation, then there are no negative attitudes towards being a client in this respect. Then the client status is just seen as a token of past contribution to society. If, on the other hand there is doubt about the situation then the client may be looked down on. This can be linked to two issues. One is that the working conditions within the firms seem to have been improved over time, both in “the Fjord” and “the Bay”. This leaves people with an uncertainty whether it is reasonable to face serious physical problems from working, lets say after a period of 4-5 years. Another thing is that behaviour is likely to be highly visible in small communities; and sometimes certain kinds of behaviour are seen not to compute with being physical ill. Then there is also the case that, at least in “the Fjord” it seems, people know of the kinds of jobs the client has had in the past. This may also be of relevance.

Summing up

It is time to return to the problem that has been addressed in this paper:

Becoming a client of the local welfare bureaucracies: will this evoke the feeling of stigma?

It seems to be clear that it is fruitful to speak of a difference between a general policy formulated at state level, and how this is perceived in small communities. At state level one are speaking of social categories and the good intentions of welfare programmes. Studying how welfare policies are perceived in small communities gives us a lesson. The lesson is that clients are seen as persons with a local “history” attached to them, which influences on how they are looked upon as clients. One important thing to remember is that this “local knowledge” seems to be limited. Having a local knowledge about persons does not indicate that you will see all the nuances and complexities of problems facing a lone mother or a young person with problems on the job-market. In a specific community there probably will also be found a specific culture that influence upon how people are judged. Both “the Fjord” and “the Bay” have a strong work ethic, and a young person may easily be looked upon as a deviant character if one is not a conform person. I think it is important to stress the fact that small communities have full potential for stigmatising clients.

Trying to answer the question formulated above is of course difficult. It is difficult because we are talking about two different communities and two different client categories. Further we have looked upon other groups in the society – examining their attitudes towards the clients. Finally we have looked at how the welfare bureaucracies function. Lets try to sum up the following way.

The Importance of Marginalisation

One hypothesis has been that clients who are evaluated as being marginalised have a greater chance to be looked down on by others (i.e.: experiencing stigma). It seems to be fair to say that the lone mothers are not into marginalisation processes. This is an important finding in many ways. It gives local people the impression that they are holding other positive roles

besides the role as a client with the Social Security Office. It is not likely to be stigmatised when you at the same time show interest in working or studying. This interest will most likely be regarded as a token that you are contributing to society. If we look at the young and unemployed it would be reasonable to say that some of them are marginalised, and in the public eye they will be seen as holding negative roles (for instance as drug addicts). Being marginalised gives you triple client status it seems, and the marginalised person will be having severe problems changing the life style that is required for being able to have a steady job. Being marginalised in a heavy way would lead to the definition of the person who has a weak character, and thus resemble the stigma type # 2, according to Goffman. It is also fair to say that some of the young and unemployed have experienced what Goffman called tribal stigma: because they are part of a deviant subculture, or because they are associated with it by some of the “locals” in the community.

One conclusion seems to be: if you are (heavily) marginalised – then client status tends to be attached to stigma: simply because you seem to lack the possibility for rapid change or because one is associated with those who are most marginalised.

The Importance of the Superficial

In Norway there is a saying that goes like this: “In small communities everybody knows each other well”. This could imply, if true, that those who comprise small communities really have information on the complexities of individual problems facing clients. One reason for being looked down on is if the client status only is seen as “weak will” to perform work. What we have seen during the research project is the following duality: Clients and street-level bureaucrats seems to be the only ones who see the nuances and complex situation of the clients. The other informants tend to reduce client status (mainly connected to social services) to one aspect; the lack of will. How should a young long-term client really be defined; unwilling or unable?

Another conclusion seems to be: when one is having a superficial view on the client one tend to look down on him or her (stigmatise).

The Importance of the Welfare Bureaucracies

It is obvious that becoming a client with the social services leads to a more direct experience of stigma, than being a client with the two other welfare bureaucracies. Some of the informants (the clients) have triple relations with the welfare bureaucracies, and being connected with the social services is by far the most “dangerous” experience. One self looks upon this as a problem, and the locals definitely sees it as a problem as well. In fact it seems like getting involved with the social services often is seen as the confirmation of weak will and as a terminus, rather than at starting point for a reversed and positive development for the client. In the eyes of local people the welfare bureaucracies may have a “bad reputation”.

The way those bureaucracies are organised is of importance for the experience of stigma. The coping strategies matters and the way one delivers the services are also of importance. The findings in the project can be illuminated by the general assumptions made by Spicker (1984). The social services are (still in 2003) a special case because of the high degree of intervention into the clients lives and discretion used by the street-level bureaucrats, other peoples labelling – since the social services still by many are looked upon as a “deviant” service due to its particularistic character.

Also the individual street-level bureaucrats attitudes or relations with the client is of importance. The relation between the street-level bureaucrat matters in this context, and this finding is in line with the assumptions made by Lipsky (1980).

Stigma seems not to be attached to the Social Security Office and the Local Employment Office in the same degree as for the social services. And there this a number of reasons for this. Still, at this point one might also recognise the differences between “the Fjord” and “the Bay”.

A third conclusion seems to be: being a client with the social services will most likely evoke the feeling of stigma.

The Importance of the Organisational Capabilities Concerning the Welfare Bureaucracies

One important thing may be linked to the interpretation of “indirect stigma” on clients connected to the welfare bureaucracies. This is not something that necessarily is “visible” for local people, but still of interest for our discussion.

When the welfare systems are not coordinated this would imply persons to be in the position as client longer than really needed. It could be argued that this is something that contributes to stigma; just because “nothing” is changing in the life of the client. If it generally is true at the welfare bureaucracies do not do a good enough job in qualifying clients – then this could be linked to stigma as well because the clients can be seen as “permanent clients” not getting anywhere. This finding makes one wonder if the “workfare” has been sufficiently understood or implemented in the two local communities which have been studied.

A fourth conclusion seems to be: if the welfare bureaucracies are lacking properties like coordination and qualifying-capabilities concerning client change; then the systems will contribute to the experience of stigma.

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