

Comments on Mike Oliver's "Social Policy and Disability"

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The current ideology stresses, as Mike Oliver points to, the value of competitive individualism. In this situation I assume that to further a policy in the interest of the disabled, we should insist that dependence is part of the human condition. Only persons living like Robinson Crusoe can be said to live an independent life - and even he needed Friday. To discuss the principles which should guide the formation of social policy in terms of independence versus dependence is therefore misleading. These terms are mainly based on the ideology of liberalistic individualism, and we should try to develop a language for the social political discourse which does not take this ideology as given.

For me as a feminist socialist, solidarity has to be the fundamental value upon which social policy should be based. As a social scientist I will therefore state the fundamental question in social policy in the following way: What kind of dependencies will be created by different social policies, and which consequences will these policies have for different groups of people?

This comment was presented at the Symposium in Sigtuna, Sweden, in April 1988.

I evaluate the concept 'adult status' as a valuable tool for analyses related to a social policy based on solidarity with disabled people. We have, however, to take care not to use such criteria for evaluating adult status that results in the white middle class man with a well paid job or a private fortune of some size becoming the only model or ideal for an adult person. As feminists have argued for some years, the independence and success in the public sphere for most of these men have been based on a great dependence on personal care and services from women in the private sphere. This is, however, a kind of dependence which in most political discourses is not acknowledged.

Accepting dependence and social control as a part of the human condition and living in a Scandinavian welfare state, I evaluate the situation today in the following way: For most adult persons a greater dependence on the state both financially and for services is preferable to a greater dependence on either family or charity in situations when one cannot manage on one's own in everyday life.

Feminist discourse offers an alternative language to the dominant one for defining identity, ethics, rights, responsibilities and knowledge. This language is in my opinion highly relevant for getting a better understanding of many of the problems connected to realizing better living conditions for the disabled.

As social research always has to simplify from a complex social reality in order to get a better understanding of some aspects of it, I also find it worthwhile to have the following advice from the American sociologist George Homans in mind: "It is not a question of whether you like the model or not, but whether it works".

For social research on disability it is a question of finding models that work in relation to the aim of bettering the life situation of the disabled, which in my opinion is closely related to the more general aim of developing a more just and caring society.

In feminist discourse there is a different notion of identity than the one based on liberalistic individualism. Women's identity is forthrightly and consistently defined in terms of the contexts of social relationships. The continued and fundamental interdependence of self and other is given. Connecting with others is for most women a primary given, not only a secondary option to be contracted at will.

There is also an ethics of responsibility which contrasts with the male ethics of rights. Further there is a notion of knowledge created

through personal and concrete interaction and through following examples. This is a notion of knowledge being concrete, and contextual, and therefore different from the notion of theoretical and scientific knowledge which is defined as impersonal, universal and absolute.

The ethics of rights based on the scientific notion of knowledge becomes a concern for elaborating rules for adjudicating competing and absolute rights between disembodied autonomous others. An ethics of responsibility or care, on the other hand, is based on a view of the world as constituted of essentially physically and socially embodied "things" which are concrete, particularistic and continuous with each other, "things" that are governed by wants and needs and thus resistant to rational control.

These differences in language and world view entail far more than simple problems in communication and intentions. Such differences are political in that they are bound up in relations of dominance and subordination and also that they provide different approaches to the political problems of conflict and order.

As for the possibility of social research to further the aim of bettering the living conditions of the disabled, we have to take into consideration the limitations resulting from social science being mainly what I have characterized as a male kind of knowledge. In addition it can also be characterized as mainly white and middle-class. It could be that a social science developed by – let us say – black working-class women would be a quite different kind of science than the one we have today. That we do not know, and we have to stick to the kind of social sciences we have. We should however admit that the role of social science in furthering a social policy in the interest of the disabled, probably has to be a limited one. It is further not self-evident that a social policy based more on social research would be less patronizing than the one we have today. In criticizing the power and influence of the professionals we seem to forget that we as researchers *also* are professionals, motivated by self-interests which more or less coincide with the interests of the disabled.

From these evaluations I consider that, in the context of the Scandinavian welfare state at least, research cannot contribute so much to finding *direct* solutions to the most important problems in the welfare state services of today. In my opinion the most important problem is to make these services more flexible and adapted to the

individual client's needs and preferences. What research can do, is to make the problems more visible – conceptualize them in ways that increase the possibility for service-providers to develop the services in a more flexible and individualistic direction. To realize this aim I think that the unsophisticated critique of the service professions is of little worth. To define professional service-providers as the "enemies" of the disabled, or conceptualizing the problems as clients and professionals having only conflicting interests is a model that in my opinion cannot work.

Oliver gives a critique of the professionals' definition of independence in terms of self-care activities. It is easy to agree with this critique. But instead of moralizing about it, we should as social scientists try to give good analyses as to *why* this definition has become so popular. One important point is probably that some of these self-care activities is not only closely connected to the value of independence, but also to the value of privacy. In most societies having other persons to observe or participate in personal hygiene activities either imply a high degree of intimacy or include an element of humiliation. To be a professional helper implies to hold this humiliation in check. But because of the general societal norms there will be a strong preference for trying to overcome the need for such helping activities. In addition, from the perspective of the service-provider, many of the services the disabled need and want, are defined as trivial and degrading work connected to the role of the private servant - a role which most women in the Western welfare states no longer accept, or at least try to avoid.

In general I think social research should be based on models acknowledging that clients and helpers have both common *and* conflicting interests. On the basis of such models we probably can come up with some advice as to how services could be organized and professionals could be educated in order to make the common rather than the conflicting interests the dominating basis for interaction.

One fundamental problem which social research should focus upon is the way the professional helping systems develop: A steadily increasing amount of professionals (including researchers) are occupied with producing ideas and theoretical knowledge on how things should be done by other employees who are mainly in relatively subordinate and low paid positions. Is there any way to counteract this steadily increasing differentiation and hierarchization or

the professional helping systems? Without finding ways to counteract these tendencies, I think it is impossible to increase the welfare of the disabled in terms of more self-determination and autonomy. At least this will be the case in societies where women no longer accept a subordinate servant role in the family or in the social services.

