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Book review:

Professional Discretion in Welfare Services. Beyond Street-Level
Bureaucracy Offices
by Tony Evans
Ashgate, Farnham 2010

In recent years a considerable body of literature has emerged around the changes observed in modern welfare systems, colonized by the logic of market and managerial discourse. The debate, which has engaged academic circles, politicians and - to some extent - broader public, is focused around such questions as public expenditures or the level of de commodification. It also points at the role of social services, their major tasks and accountability to the state and citizens. These processes again raise questions which are focal points in the welfare debate. The problem of professional status of social work, taken up by Tony Evans, is definitely one of such topics.

The leitmotiv of the reviewed book, devoted to the analysis of welfare services in United Kingdom, is the notion of professional discretion. This term, as the Author admits, is difficult to precise, but can be understood as a freedom to act within the work role (p. 33): define problems and needs have influence on the allocation of resources and “substantial control over (...) own area of work” (p. 30). Discretion is also inevitably connected with having power over people. In chapters 1-3 the Author demonstrates the complexity of relations between discretion and the concept of “professional”, reminding doubts concerning the professional status of social work in Great Britain, where its recognition as a profession is associated with the reforms undertaken at the beginning of 1970s (even if history of debate over social workers’ status is much longer) and since then, it has been criticized constantly. As Tony Evans puts it in a nutshell, the problem of professional discretion “encapsulates the tension in current policy between the increasing regulation of practice and the need for practitioners’ initiative and creativity in policy implementation” (p. 1).

Managerialization of social services in United Kingdom, started under conservative governments and reinforced by the reforms introduced by the New Labour, has been considered as a serious threat for the discretion granted to people working in welfare services. The pressure on effectiveness and budgetary control are regarded as factors that contributed to the transformation of social work into care management, subjected to meticulous control based on political goals and centralized guidelines.

In his book, Evans deals with the notion of discretion as it was framed by the Michael Lipsky’s concept of street-level bureaucracy, developed in 1980. Lipsky coined the term “street-level bureaucrat” to depict institutional roles of frontline public service workers (such as teachers, policeman, doctors, social workers etc.) who in their

everyday practice have to implement policy goals and apply theoretical knowledge, which is frequently problematic. They are also put in situations where they have to make rather quick decisions based on scarce information and having limited resources at their disposal. At the same time, they are accountable to the law, the organization, the clients and professional norms. In order to meet contradictory requirements and still be able to do their job effectively, street-level bureaucrats have to develop routines of practice and are granted considerable level of *de facto* discretion.

Having in mind major changes within the public sphere which are especially visible in welfare, in chapter 2, the Author provides a strong argumentation that the concept by Lipsky (criticized as inapplicable in UK and in today's reality) may be still considered as adequate analytical tool to investigate functioning of public services in contemporary Britain. On the other hand, Tony Evans proves to be aware of limitations of this theory. Among others, he points out that in Lipsky's work little attention was paid to the role of managers in everyday functioning of public institutions identified as street-level bureaucracies, and in fact, this author treated them as a homogenous group whose role is to restrict the autonomy of street-level staff. Taking into consideration the problems deriving from diversification of the managers' category is definitely the strong point of the reviewed book, especially if one remembers about increasing role of managers within social service organizations.

Thus, the empirical study undertaken by the Author and reported in Chapters 4-7 (and concluding chapter) was aimed not only at analyzing the relation between professional status and the level of discretion, but also at exploring the nature of management in the field of welfare. It was designed as a comparative case study, covering two public institutions settled in English department and being typical example of local institutional setting facing the shift in approach to public provision. Changes within the construction and delivery of social services observed in the community reflected the reform of local administration, implemented in 1998 in England and Wales. "Newunit¹ is a relatively small Social Services authority and inherited this responsibility from the former county authority, which ceased to exist in April 1998, and which is here referred to as 'Oldshire'" (p. 73). What is more, the introduction of the market discourse and strategies the community care reforms in the early 1990s introduced market discourses to Social Service provision which introduced managerial language and strategies into social work and stimulated the transformation of a social worker into care manager. The Author also managed to show how the "managerial turn", stimulated by the community care reforms in the early 1990s, overlapped the old tensions resulting from the mismatch between policy goals and resources. In studied community, it touched mostly the services aimed at the elderly and resulted in the constant pressure on cuts which were contradictory to the reformers' assumptions concerning effectiveness and target orientation.

The research was focused on two types of public institutions which create different contexts for professional discretion of social workers employed in The Mental Health Team and Old Persons Team. The analytical framework of the study was constructed mainly to examine the Lipsky's theory, but it also employed different perspectives on discretion which could have emerged in course of managerialization of social services. The typology of the discretion regimes (see Chapter 3) proposed by the Author seems to be a convenient tool for analysis. The domination of managerialism as a first type, underlines that in social services both *de jure* and *de facto* discretion is minimal because of high effectiveness of control over frontline workers who have very limited opportunity to resist it. The street-level bureaucracy account notices that the

¹ „Newunit” and „Oldshire” are nicknames invented by the Author.

inconsistencies of managerial control give the street-level workers the tools to defend against it (discretion *de facto*). In turn, the Author proposes discursive managerialism as a third alternative based on assumption that not only the limitations of resources but also some elements of professional identities shared by frontline workers and managers, open the floor to varied local versions of *de facto* discretion, which becomes a subject of negotiations.

The choice of theoretical context of the analysis is every researcher's autonomous decision. The review of literature and research reported in the book seems respectable and critical. However, from sociological perspective and given the theme of the research, I think it could be valuable to refer also to famous studies by Barney Glaser and Eliot Freidson devoted to professional practice. Also Bourdieu's field theory might serve as a decent inspiration for the empirical project undertaken by the Author.

Seeking for inspiration in classical pieces of methodologically honed empirical works could prevent the study from some methodological weaknesses. The chapters devoted to analysis of the own empirical findings are preceded with a short methodological introduction. The main idea of the study and key categories are also explained in previous chapters, but the Author's approach to data collection and interpretation remains slightly unclear to me. The information about circumstances of the research are scattered throughout different parts of the book and seem to be rather scarce. Without an explicit commitment to any methodological tradition, the Author decided to conduct a case study, following Walton's approach which underlines the importance of theory in identifying cases and reminding that large number of units of analysis is not required to make the description a "thick" one. It would be also welcomed if operationalization of this term would be accompanied by the reference to Clifford Geertz.

The description of conditions under which two social service units operate is dense, well-structured and proving the Author's high expertise in the field. Also numerous and long quotations from the interviews, which are interpreted by the Author, seem to be very informative and let to draw the picture of institutional reality which is sometimes far from our assumptions. Yet, the body of data gathered for the purpose of the study is difficult to estimate. In the Introduction we can read that "the study involved qualitative research of the views of professional social workers – eight practitioners and four frontline managers (...)" (p. 7). The Author claims that face to face interviews were supplemented by observational data and documents, but neither the exact context and construction of the interviews nor the status of the other sources of data, are explained in detail.

Thus, the reading-matter poses unanswered questions, just to mention some of them: How were the interviews structured? Were they conducted at workplace or somewhere else? Were the observations conducted in an organized way? What was the time period of the fieldwork? If it comes to the approach to data analysis, we can get to know only that it was based on "iterative process of critical reading and categorization (Edwards and Talbot 1999)" (p. 7). The large body of social science methodological literature regarding these issues seems to be omitted by the Author. In his theory of street-level bureaucracy, Lipsky put strong emphasis on the social practice, which encourages employing micro-perspectives. Also Tony Evans states in the Introduction: "There is a growing recognition that social policy research needs to be grounded in street-level experience" (p. 1). The idea of discretion is difficult to investigate, as it is being understood differently, but it is definitely linked with the autonomy and freedom granted to professionals or even as one of the key indicators of a profession. Thus, in my opinion, it would be exceptionally interesting and important to get deeper into the relationship between social workers' declarations and actual

strategies of exercising professional discretion in everyday practice, i.e. how the relations within the welfare institution are built in course of interactions among the members of the teams under study, between frontline workers and managers of different levels. Professional discretion has been contested from many perspectives. In United Kingdom it has been challenged not only by neoliberal discourse, but also by the welfare scandals which have been putting forward in the public debate the problem of social workers' autonomy by condemning the examples of their "arrogance" resulting either in abuse or negligence. Having these in mind, it would be vital to look on how "managerialized" reality affects the contacts between the street-level bureaucrats and the clients. This would certainly require applying different perspective and techniques, but could also bring valuable results, supplementing the outcomes of the research undertaken by Evans.

The economic crises have become a convenient excuse to question the effectiveness of welfare as such, to cut down on expenditures and reduce institutional support networks. Therefore, monitoring this area by conducting methodologically honed research becomes even more essential matter. The reviewed book, even if it does not meet expectations of a reader with sociological background, still can be considered as an important voice in ongoing debate over welfare state, its aims and roles in modern societies.

Citation

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