

Klientdemokrati – vision och verklighet.

En studie i fem kommuner

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av

Anne Hermodsson

Socionom, fil. lic.

Institutionen för socialt arbete
Stockholms universitet

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Abstract

Client Democracy – Vision and reality. A study of five Swedish municipalities

The Social Services Act was formulated and passed during a time of strong ideological movements in the Swedish society. Democratic issues were on the agenda in many areas, including social welfare, and moral entrepreneurs with social positions and access to power exerted a heavy influence on the social services debate that took place during the 1960s and 1970s.

These moral entrepreneurs drove the point that social welfare, which was considered patriarchal, must be transformed from its very foundations. The overall goals for the social services, including that of democracy, should be maintained also on the individual level and thus function even in "things small". This should also envelop the vulnerable in society in their encounter with the social services. But in the clarification of client democracy in this contradictory field of activity – embracing both the exercise of authority, means testing and controls – an ambiguity was exposed.

The aim of this dissertation has been to obtain knowledge about the democratic goals of the Social Services Act and the expression of these goals in practical work. The background to and emergence of these democratic goals has been investigated as well as the means used to realise them, and the extent to which these means have been applied in the social services has been looked at. The empirical material was collected in five municipalities of different character as well as from different social work organisations. The work contains material from two different investigations. Material for the Social Services Project collected in 1983 includes 651 interviews with clients and questionnaires completed by their social workers. For the Eskil Study carried out in 1986, some 242 interviews with clients were made and questionnaires returned by their social workers.

Based on the definition of client democracy in the preparatory legal work, clients' knowledge, awareness of the facts in their case and possibilities of influencing outcomes were subjected to scrutiny. Factors on three levels were considered, relating to the individual, to the social work and to the organisational and structural conditions. The results show that clients are not always aware of their rights or of the possibilities that exist to strengthen their positions. A large number are unaware of important matters affecting their own cases. It is further revealed that contracts are not always drawn up and clients not always aware of them even when they are in place.

Clients are not a homogenous group, however, but rather a many-layered one. Those who could be considered worst off in various respects stand less of a chance of being able to assert their civic rights. These are clients lacking normal resources, whose social networks are wanting, who have low education and little personal resources to fall back on. Immigrants, youth and elderly clients also show greater difficulties in utilising their possibilities. Differences can also be related to structural conditions, such as type of municipality, decision-making model and the social work itself.

For the client to be able to use his democratic rights, the form of social work is crucial. The ultimate challenge of work with the care of the individual and the family is to comfortably combine treatment aspects with the exercise of authority. In order to minimise this democracy's "black hole", channels must be established through which the client can exert an influence. Knowledge is important for the ability to assert one's rights, but also for stimulating the will to assertion. Giving information and making sure that such information is duly received is therefore vital. Providing transparency about the client's own case is also important, not least in order to reduce the uncertainty on the part of many clients with regard to the contacts with other public authorities taken by social workers.

The results also show that those who experience contact with the social worker as negative and those counted as difficult cases more often can conceive of asserting their rights. This underlines the importance of formal channels, such as the right of appeal. But such channels have been reduced and no rights exist of going to another social services office or of choosing a different social worker. This makes the actions of each social worker in each individual case even more crucial in order to avoid feelings of powerlessness among clients, as well as to promote democracy even in "things small" in the social services' care of the individual and the family.

Key words: clients, democracy, empowerment, social services, rights, influence, participation,