

ROUTLEDGE ADVANCES IN HEALTH AND SOCIAL POLICY

Power and Welfare

Understanding Citizens' Encounters with
State Welfare

Nanna Mik-Meyer and Kaspar Villadsen

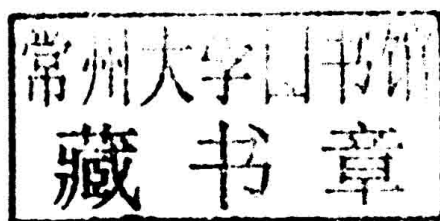


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First published 2013

by Routledge

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada

by Routledge

711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Mik-Meyer, Nanna.

Power and welfare : understanding citizens' encounters with state welfare / Nanna Mik-Meyer and Kaspar Villadsen.

p. cm. -- (Routledge advances in health and social policy)

1. Human services. 2. Social service. 3. Public welfare. I. Villadsen, Kaspar. II. Title.

HV40.M5195 2013

361--dc23

2012024760

ISBN13: 978-0-415-53442-0 (hbk)

ISBN13: 978-0-203-11337-0 (ebk)

Typeset in Goudy

by Taylor & Francis Books



Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

'Theory is, or should be, the servant and facilitator of empirical inquiry, which cannot take place without it. In this book, Mik-Meyer and Villadsen offer a sustained and disciplined example of that approach to theory. *Power and Welfare* is clear and accessible ... and will still be read when many fashionable theory texts have vanished from view.'

*Richard Jenkins, Professor, Department of Sociological Studies,
The University of Sheffield, UK*

'This book is not only an examination of highly relevant and applicable theoretical approaches to power and welfare. It also shows the multiple forms and aspects of the play of power in the encounters between the citizen and the professional within the highly ambiguous context of contemporary liberalism. In both these respects, it is a leading example of what is emerging as a distinctive Copenhagen approach to public policy and governance.'

*Mitchell Dean, Professor, University of Newcastle,
Australia, and Copenhagen Business School, Denmark*

Power and Welfare

In the welfare provision of today, power takes both the shape of juridical sanctions and of attractive offers for self-development. When state institutions punish criminals, remove children at risk, or enforce sanctions upon welfare recipients the question of power is immediately urgent. It is less readily evident that power is at stake when institutions educate, counsel or 'empower' citizens. This book offers a framework for understanding and analyzing these complex and implicit forms of power at play in the encounters between citizens and welfare institutions.

Taking as its starting point the idea that power takes many different shapes, and that different approaches to power may be necessary in the diverse contexts where citizens encounter welfare professionals, the book demonstrates how significant social theorists, spanning from Goffman to Foucault, can be used for inquiries into these encounters. Guiding the reader from their epistemological foundations to lucid 'state of the art' case examples, the book unpacks each of its six theoretical perspectives, and explains selected key concepts and explicates their potential for analysis. The final chapter discusses the usefulness of the theoretical approaches, their weaknesses and indicates some possibilities of theoretical integration.

Including case studies of patients, nursing home residents, unemployed people, homeless people, and young offenders, from the USA, Denmark, France, Sweden, Canada, and Australia, *Power and Welfare* is designed for students and researchers of social policy, sociology, anthropology, political science, education, nursing and social work.

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Foreword

I first read *Magtens Former*, the Danish book of which this is in part a translation and in part a development, in 2010, three years after its publication. Its title can be loosely rendered into English as *The Forms of Power*. I had previously heard one of its authors, Nanna Mik-Meyer, speak at a conference and I had read a collection of essays on the shaping of clients in welfare systems that she had co-edited. So when I saw the book, about power, in the Athenaeum Bookshop in Copenhagen, I picked it up for a quick look at the contents.

Ten or more minutes later I was a few pages into the opening chapter and decided that I had better stop clogging up the aisles and buy it. I was immediately taken with it, and I remain so. If anything, this offspring of that original book is better than its parent: it is internationalised in its use of case material, and the discipline of writing in English has produced what is probably a leaner and clearer text. In other words, this is not just a translation; even if you already own *Magtens Former*, it is worth having *Power and Welfare* too.

I shan't attempt to summarise the book's contents or the authors' arguments, not least because that isn't my job. No, my job is to convince anyone who picks it up to put their hand in their pocket and buy it. If you have any interest in social policy, social theory (particularly with respect to power), organisation studies or comparative sociology, there are a number of good reasons why you should do so.

First, and perhaps most important, most books about power, and most theories of power, operate at levels of abstraction so rarified that they only dimly perceive the solid earth of the real world, at some great distance beneath them. This book, however, has both feet – perhaps that should be all four feet, since there are two authors – on the ground. It is undoubtedly a theory text, but it is rooted in, and derives its arguments from, the careful use of empirical case studies drawn from various public sectors and welfare regimes in modern industrial societies. In these case studies, organisations and individuals come to life as the real stuff of the human world, and how power works and is experienced by flesh and blood people comes into sharp focus.

The sub-title is 'Understanding Citizens' Encounters with State Welfare', and this book is as much about those encounters as it is about power. Citizenship in modern social democratic nation-states – and even the USA qualifies in many important respects – is intimately bound up with the relationship between individuals and the state. The encounters in which those relationships are shaped and developed are anything but abstract, and on their nature, and outcomes, depends the integration of the citizenry into the state: the social contract and the social settlement. Power – its nature and how it is exercised – is central to understanding both.

Second, Mik-Meyer and Villadsen have developed a conception of power that is usefully, and pragmatically, pitched between two extremes that bedevil discussions of this topic: it is neither so all-encompassing and universal that it is in danger of being everything and nothing, nor so rooted in individual agency that it is difficult to see any place, in a Hobbesian universe of all against all, for organisations, institutions and patterns, let alone values and culture. These two polar alternatives may be caricatures but, like all lampoonery, they have some merit. What's more, the authors are perfectly comfortable with the idea that somewhat different understandings of power may be necessary for different purposes, and that what is required is a synthesis of those different models.

Next there is a general point, which has already been hinted at, about social theory. Social theory has become a self-sufficient enterprise in its own right, an elite intellectual pursuit during which the big beasts of the social science academy go head to head in order to make their names and carve out careers. It may always have been thus, but social theory that is an end in itself – self-referential, self-regarding, self-important and undisciplined by serious attention to evidence – has moved a dangerous distance away from what I have always taken the role of theory to be, in any discipline: a means to the end of collecting and interpreting empirical data, which, in a virtuous circle, is itself shaped and tested in that process. In other words, theory is, or should be, the servant and facilitator of empirical inquiry, which cannot take place without it. In this book, Mik-Meyer and Villadsen offer a sustained and disciplined example of that approach to theory. It is most welcome.

There is also, perhaps, something to be said about the academic field of social or public policy. No doubt in exasperation at the various turns that social theory has taken in the last two or three decades, some social policy analysts have lowered their own theoretical bar, or perhaps even turned their backs on social theory altogether. This is understandable, if regrettable. If they can be persuaded to give *Power and Welfare* a chance, it may entice them back and rekindle their interest in theory.

Finally – and remarkably, given its intellectual merits – Nanna Mik-Meyer and Kaspar Villadsen have written something that, before it is anything else, is a book for students. Their teachers will profit enormously from reading it as well, for the reasons outlined above, but this is unashamedly a textbook,

and it's all the better for it. It is clear, accessible and offers students as definite a vision of the uses and value of sociology as they are ever likely to come across. I dare say that C. Wright Mills would have approved. As such it is a major achievement. *Power and Welfare* will still be being read when many fashionable theory texts have vanished from view.

Richard Jenkins
September 2012

Contents

<i>Foreword</i>	ix
1 Introduction	1
2 Foucault: The flexible critique of welfare	10
3 Goffman: Interaction and identity negotiations	29
4 Bourdieu: Field, symbolic violence and domination	48
5 Luhmann: Welfare in communicative systems	67
6 Neo-institutional theory: Myths and legitimacy	87
7 Risk theory: Normality, deviation and neo-liberalism	107
8 Integrating the approaches	125
<i>Notes</i>	145
<i>Bibliography</i>	147
<i>Index</i>	156

1 Introduction

Power is very much at the heart of contemporary debate about the encounter between state and citizen. Nowadays, whether you are a researcher, lecturer, practitioner or the head of an institution, you are required to reflect on the forms of power that come into play when citizens encounter the institutions of the state. On the one hand, you are required to reflect on how to place certain limits on the scope of power exercised by the state and its institutions vis-à-vis individuals and groups whose autonomy must be maintained and respected. Such reflections on the limits of power are accompanied by forms of governing that are often presented to citizens as attractive offers, using positive terms such as empowerment, coaching, self-realisation and partnership. One example of this is when social work and health care use dialogue-based initiatives designed to make clients' and patients' own words and values the basis for interventions. The aim of dialogue-based initiatives is, in this case, to avoid welfare institutions imposing goals and values on people that do not stem "from within", in other words from the individual's own free will (Karlsen & Villadsen 2008). A widely held conviction in public policy debates is that welfare institutions must avoid the conventional action plans and expert targets that too readily lead to accusations of "clientisation", "learned helplessness" and "hospitalisation". The ideal often voiced to avoid this risk is a form of power that promotes and increases the individual's capacity for self-government or taking up an "active citizenship". On the other hand, we witness, in contemporary welfare policy, trends towards an increasing use of sovereign, paternalistic power in relation to specific individuals and in specific contexts.

A number of authors have pointed out that the contemporary dominant form of governing, referred to in this book as "neo-liberal governing" or "advanced liberal governing", does not imply that sovereign power is completely abandoned, but rather that the exercise of sovereign power constitutes an inherent feature of modern Western societies. Sovereign power, in the form of coercion, incarceration and domination, can, for instance, be exercised by referring to the absence of willpower in the subject – alcohol and drug abusers, people suffering from mental illness or "uncivilised" people in the former colonies etc. (Valverde 1996, Dean 2002). However, sovereign state power is

2 Power and Welfare

also exercised in relation to individuals and groups deemed to pose a threat to the health, integration or economic well-being of society, illustrated by the way some states treat immigrants and refugees.

The coexistence of these two forms of power creates ambiguous forms of governance. Politicians talk about the desirability of reducing the role of the state and promoting the autonomy and self-determination of institutions and citizens, while at the same time, central government tightens control and imposes sanctions in a number of spheres. Examples of this include the requirement for curricula that are formulated centrally but must be enacted locally in schools and educational institutions. Other examples include calls for local authorities and institutions to develop their own integration initiatives at the same time as the government places specific requirements on the content, objectives and sanctions of integration policy.

Critical evaluations of the recent reforms of public services, grouped under the heading New Public Management (NPM), identify a tension between political targets for imposing uniform standards (rationalising costs and ensuring compliance with legislation) and the need to allow local institutions to adapt services to local needs, develop new procedures and establish their own values. The governing paradox consists of how the state can act in an authoritarian “top-down” fashion at the same time as it guarantees local autonomy (Clarke & Newman 1997). Institutions therefore often treat people both as administrative cases to be processed by reference to sovereign state law, and as individuals with particular needs and potentials that must be given specific attention.

This ambition to treat the citizen as unique is illustrated by the current ideal in treatment facilities, schools and social work offices etc., of accepting the citizen “as he or she is” – in other words, as a whole and unique human being who must be taken into account in his/her particularity (Villadsen 2007). However, these institutions are characterised by distinct professional logics or rationalities, which guides how the staff observe and encounter the citizen (Mik-Meyer 2007, 2010a). What is considered an ailment requiring treatment, a barrier to integration, a factor motivating the individual to change or measure their capacity to work etc., is fundamentally conditioned by the professional codes applied by the social workers. In other words, particular discursive and practical frameworks shape the encounter between the citizen and the professional – and condition decisions on eligibility for benefits, for placement on job-creation schemes or education/training courses, as well as for diagnosis, treatment and so on. In this way, power, knowledge, intervention and professional logic are closely interwoven in the encounter between the citizen and the state.

Gubrium and Holstein’s 2001 anthology, *Institutional Selves – Troubled Identities in a Postmodern World*, offers an excellent description of the impossibility of separating the institutional setting – and its specific forms of power, knowledge and intervention – from in-depth analyses of the encounter between the citizen and the state. These are elements that create specific “institutional

identities". "Authentic selves" do not lurk deep inside the individual (Gubrium & Holstein 2001: 1). What we currently understand as our "personal self" is "increasingly deprivatized [...], our most private essence is now being constructed and interpreted under the auspices of decidedly *public* going concerns", as Gubrium and Holstein put it (2001: 2 – italics in the original).

Advanced liberalism

Extensive empirical evidence of encounters between professionals and citizens in various welfare institutions across advanced liberal societies reveals that values such as efficiency, personal responsibility, freedom, empowerment and self-help presently play a key role in professionals' encounters with the citizen (Dean 1995, Howe 1996, Mik-Meyer 2007, 2010a, Villadsen 2007, Michailakis & Schirmer 2010). We choose the terms "neo-liberalism" and "advanced liberalism" to refer to these values and new practices. Advanced liberalism is used by Rose (1996a) to point out several tendencies in contemporary Western, liberal societies. First, he observes that a new relationship between expertise and the subjects of government has emerged. Increasingly, experts must exercise a facilitating form of power that makes alliances with its citizens. Experts must seek "to align the self-governing capacities of subjects with objectives of political authorities by means of persuasion, education and seduction, rather than coercion" (Rose 1996a: 50). Second, advanced liberal forms of governing give preference to indirect mechanisms of power, or to political action that keeps the subjects of government at a distance. They use a range of techniques that can translate the objectives of welfare authorities into the choices and commitments of both professionals and their clients. Examples of this include instances when the expert adviser gives way to self-help manuals, ambulant "self-treatment", and the telephone helpline "as practices whereby each individual binds themselves to expert advice as a matter of their own freedom" (Rose 1996a: 58).

While we wish to pay attention to these "advanced liberal" forms of exercising power in the encounter between welfare institutions and citizens, we also wish to maintain that the emphases on self-help, willpower and responsibility are not exclusive, and we are thus attentive to how these new ways of exercising power coexist, intertwine or contrast with sovereign and disciplinary forms of power. Apart from taking inspiration from the diagnostics of Rose and other governmentality writers, we emphasise that the concept of neo-liberalism in this context does not refer to a coherent political programme, a distinct historical epoch or a political philosophy. Instead, the purpose of the concept of neo-liberalism is to focus on a particular way of reasoning regarding the exercise of government and the practical invention of particular technical means of governing. We thus wish to invite the researcher or student to avoid an abstract, a priori and too

hasty critique (“this is simply neo-liberal domination”) and to give priority to the careful study of practices.

In line with Howe (1996), we also detect changes in the more specific conditions that characterise welfare institutions’ – and their professionals’ – encounters with the citizen. It is a process that has been changing the nature of social work since the 1980s, succinctly described as the transformation from “diagnostic caseworker to care manager, from applied social scientist to service coordinator” (Howe 1996: 77). Howe may arguably describe this shift rather bluntly but it is relevant nevertheless to consider his key question: “What form does social work take when it no longer finds itself in a ‘discourse’ of discipline but rather one of radical liberalism?” (Howe 1996: 78). Commentators like Howe identify that a new context is emerging, one that increasingly places what are referred to as neo-liberal values at centre stage in current welfare provision. This is not, of course, a development that completely removes the professions and their particular codes of social work from the equation. It does, however, affect the professions’ room for manoeuvre, and reconfigures the authorised assumptions about the type of individual that they are to fabricate. Research indicates that welfare recipients are assumed to be capable of developing and freeing themselves from need and dependency – a form of a self-actualising that revolves around personal responsibility, choice and autonomy (Rose 1999, Cruikshank 1999, Villadsen 2007, Mik-Meyer 2010a). There is a widely evident idea that the citizen in the role of a welfare dependent should recognise him or herself as the author of (and the potential rescuer from) his or her misfortune.

This transformation of social policies, which we are currently witnessing in advanced liberal societies, involves not only a shift in power structures (from state to market) and responsibility (from public to private domains), but also concerns who the citizen is fundamentally imagined to be and which obligations are considered legitimate in relation to citizenship. The increasingly pervasive process of individualisation allegedly experienced across modern Western societies (Giddens 1991, Bauman 1992) means that citizens are increasingly held responsible for their own situation – their health, learning, treatment or integration. The ideal citizen is one who acts responsibly, is strong-willed, and acknowledges that he or she plays the essential role in solving his or her own problems (Miller 2001, Mik-Meyer 2010a, Lessenich 2011). These normatively loaded conceptions of the ideal citizen create new conditions for the welfare institutions’ encounters with him or her. As mentioned previously, it is the conditions for this encounter – and their consequences for the relationship between citizen and welfare provision – that will be studied in this book.

The changes in social work can also be related to a series of parallel trends that impact on both the professionals’ encounter with the citizen and the institutional conditions for the professionals’ activities more generally. We use the term social worker in a broad sense that includes integration workers, therapists, health advisers and other professionals who provide care and

encourage individuals to undertake lifestyle changes. We wish to be able to study how ideals for personal development are at play both in relation to the citizen (demands for self-development) and in relation to the requirements placed on professionals to undertake a particular type of self-government. Welfare institutions are therefore required to use particular techniques that regulate practices and promote a sense of personal responsibility in the institution's users. The challenge increasingly evident in welfare provision is that the citizen is expected, voluntarily and freely, to take up politically determined development goals and obligations. As such, although services and projects that target the unemployed, the ill, immigrants and disaffected youngsters etc. are rooted in political goals stipulated centrally or by local authorities, social work now expects the targeted individuals to take up active responsibility for these goals.

Both authoritarian and facilitating

Rather than view this conflict of interests as the clash between irreconcilable demands that it appears to be, we believe mutually opposing trends such as the above-mentioned should be seen as reflecting a new kind of ambivalent or even paradoxical governance (Clarke & Newman 1997, Villadsen 2012). Contemporary welfare policies display liberal ideals of freedom by emphasising the need for the reduction of state control and expenditure, and for institutions and citizens to be made more self-responsible (Mik-Meyer & Roelsgaard Obling 2012, Villadsen 2012). At the same time, more and more governing techniques are being devised from central authorities, the purpose of which, in addition to ensuring the optimal utilisation of resources through detailed management, is to propel the institution/citizen towards the ideal state, to become: responsible, strong-willed and in complete self-control (Mik-Meyer 2010b). Howe would appear to have identified important changes in the encounter between professionals and clients when he asserts that the nature of the encounter has evolved: "From interpersonal to economic, from therapeutic to transactional, from nurturing and supportive to contractual and service-orientated" (Howe 1996: 93). These are transformations that give rise to new – and often mutually contradictory – conditions for the welfare institutions' encounter with the citizen, as the logic of economic efficiency and standardised services seeks to breach the former enclosures of welfare expertise. This means that we need to pay attention to how the goals of welfare reforms are weighed against professional discretion and specific values, including for example, holistic care.

As the analyses presented in the book will show, such conflicting trends are not only discernible in the structural conditions for the work carried out, but they also reappear in the practices that seek to define the problems and needs of the institutions' target groups. However, it should be remembered that political goals are not introduced into professional practices in a mechanical and uncontested manner. In the specific encounter between the

welfare institution and the citizen, the professional staff, who have professional loyalties insofar as they refer their decisions to their professional values and guard their right to define the specific content of their work, remain a highly significant factor (see Fox 2001, Loseke 2001, Mik-Meyer 2011).

This complex, structuring aspect of the encounter between citizen and professional is the theme of the book. We engage with this theme by demonstrating how selected sociological approaches can be used to identify and analyse how power is at play in the structuring of the encounters and is actively played out in the specific encounters. A key relevance to our concerns is that traditional forms of professionalism and welfare services are affected by and intertwine with neo-liberal governance strategies in new and complex ways. Studies carried out in this contemporary terrain of conflicting political and professional rationalities that interact the demands of service-users, require, we believe, a complex concept of power.

First, this concept of power needs to be capable of encapsulating the particular rationality of government that characterises advanced liberal societies. It has to be capable of encapsulating the fact that the freedom citizens are encouraged to practice will always assume certain programmatic forms. As a consequence, government in neo-liberal societies inevitably, and always, operates with certain naturalised images of who the citizen is and what he or she is capable of (Gubrium & Holstein 2001). Since the idea is to ensure or realise what is assumed to pre-exist governmental intervention, at least latently, for example self-responsibility, the will to work, and the desire to be social (Michailakis & Schirmer 2010), neo-liberal forms of government must always keep a sceptical eye on the limits of its own power. This type of government tries to shape, facilitate and influence the actions of individuals and their self-relations, yet must avoid assuming responsibility for them or stifling the willpower assumed to reside in each individual. Neo-liberalism, then, should not be viewed as a monolithic or totalising programme that enforces its values upon society in a uniform and pre-specified manner (Gordon 1991). Rather, neo-liberalism uses forms of government that recognise that their results cannot be imposed or predetermined, but that they depend fundamentally on the activities of the governed, who are, after all, "free individuals". There is a recognition that power does not emanate from a centre, but that the exercise of power is rather about installing certain tendencies and norms into individuals' relationships with each other. These kinds of reflections on the power evident in contemporary programmes for the reform of welfare services are rather advanced, and call for analytical tools that match their complexity (Villadsen & Karlsen 2012).

Second, our concept of power must also be able to grasp the complexity in modern welfare provision. Hence, our object of analysis is a heterogeneous range of institutions, divided into distinct professional and institutional systems, each characterised by a significant degree of autonomy, a particular field of discretion, and a certain professional blindness. When different

groups of professionals encounter an individual – for instance, a homeless person with a substance-abuse problem or a pain-afflicted patient – they simply do not see, in some cases, the same problem, or the same needs and potentials, for that matter (Mik-Meyer 2010b, Mik-Meyer & Obling 2012, Villadsen 2011a). In other words, the power exercised in encounters between the citizen and welfare professionals is not uniform, coherent or pre-determined in a modern society with a differentiated division of labour between welfare specialisms. Modern welfare services are permeated by a range of distinct professional logics and practices, and the researcher must take into account their different rationalities, forms of co-operation, mutual support and occasional rivalries.

To that end, we need an analytical perspective that can view power as shaped in the particular institutional-professional context as well as in the specific encounter between the citizen and the institution. In brief, power must be seen as immanent to its context and should not be regarded as over-arching, unidirectional or essentially repressive. In this book, different forms of power are conceptualised by terms such as discipline, government, pastoral power, dominance, symbolic violence, strategy and more. Common to these theoretical concepts is that they view power as productive, in the sense that both citizens and professionals continuously reproduce specific practices and institutions that set frameworks for the relationships that both professionals and citizens may establish with each other and with themselves. Or, in other words, power produces subjectivities, (dis)positions and relations.

Choice of analytical approaches

Common to the sociological approaches presented in this book, is that power is not reduced to a prevailing ideology that happens to have installed itself in the mentalities of professionals, nor do the approaches attribute the source of power to a single source such as the state apparatus, class relations or modes of production. Our choice of constructivist and predominantly post-structural approaches brings to the book the idea that power must be viewed as intrinsic to social relations, including the use of language, institutional practice and micro-interactions that give shape to welfare provision. This implies that there are not encounters between professionals and citizens “and then, *in addition, alongside or on top of these relations*, mechanisms of power that modify or disturb them, or make them more consistent, coherent, or stable” (Foucault 2007: 2 – our italics). Or, putting it differently, encounters between professionals and citizens inevitably involve plays of power. Moreover, we do not work with a single theory of power, but with a framework of different analytical strategies that highlight different problematics of power in relation to the encounter between welfare professionals and the citizen. We wish to demonstrate that this encounter may be explored from a variety of analytical approaches that produce different research questions, including how the encounter between the citizen and the