

## LISTENING TO AND OBSERVING WELFARE STATES AS AN ANTHROPOLOGIST

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### *Abstract*

*This article argues for a greater use of qualitative methods in researching welfare systems. Tracing some of the main developments of welfare state research in Scandinavia and looking at the social and historical context of this work, it is suggested that the dominant quantitative thrust of research has greatly restricted our understanding of the welfare state. The article concludes by arguing for combining both qualitative and quantitative approaches in investigating welfare systems, professional helpers and their clients.*

*Keywords: welfare state, qualitative methods, anthropological research*

### *Összefoglaló*

*A tanulmány a szociális ellátó rendszerek kvalitatív szempontú vizsgálatának fontosságára világít rá. A skandináv kutatási irányokat áttekintve, a tevékenység társadalmi és történeti kontextusát megismerve láthatjuk, hogy a vizsgálatokban kizárólagosságra törekvő kvantitatív irány a jóléti állam működésének megértését korlátozza. A szerző a kvalitatív és a kvantitatív módszerek kombinációja mellett érvel a jóléti rendszerek, a hivatásos segítők és klienseik jobb megismerése érdekében.*

*Kulcsszavak: jóléti állam, kvalitatív módszerek, antropológiai kutatás*

All of us wishing to learn more about this complex creature that for lack of a better name can be called the welfare state are like the vision impaired investigators of the elephant in the ancient Indian/Chinese parable. In the world of fables, however, endings are often happy ones. Thus, all the blind researchers - though initially bickering about their respective findings – agreed in the end to cooperate and in so doing, they began to learn more about

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the creature none of them had ever seen.

In the world of welfare state research, however, even though all of us suffer from similar handicaps, the methodological claims of some investigators long have monopolized the field. Rather than fostering the kinds of cooperation allowing all to “see”, their territorial “truth” claims for decades have limited rather than increased our knowledge of the structures and workings of welfare systems. Though my concern here is with showing the benefits to be gained by using research methods long denigrated, neglected and silenced, I wish to begin by providing a politically and historically informed account of how a particular set of quantitative, rather than qualitative, methods came to dominate the field of welfare research in Norway – and, I strongly, suspect elsewhere in Scandinavia and Western Europe.

Following this, I wish to make a case for going back to the basics of anthropological and sociological research. In so doing, it is my aim to suggest that traditional methods of participant observational research possess greater potentials than quantitative methods for capturing the flows, contradictions and conflicts involved in the everyday operations of welfare systems and interactions between professional helpers and their clients. And finally, after briefly discussing several key issues involved in studying these arenas from this perspective, I wish to conclude by touching upon two areas. The first involves a set of generalizations about the welfare state yielded by participating in, observing and listening to what goes on in many of its arenas. The second and final area suggests how inferences can be made about larger cultural systems and social structures in society at large drawing upon what can be seen and heard in welfare settings.

When I first began investigating welfare systems in Norway three decades ago, proposing to study welfare systems with any methods other than a narrowly defined set of quantitative techniques was quite simply an act of heresy. As one researcher succinctly and honestly put it, the ruling methodological ethos in Norway as formulated *in English* was: “If you can’t count it, it doesn’t count” (Grønmo, 1982, 94). Then - and now I am sorry to say - the mainstream formula for gaining what passes as knowledge of the welfare state involves selecting samples, designing and administering questionnaires to these samples and then running the collected data through various mills of statistical tests. The end products of these operations are then presented in a grand parade of reports, articles, white papers, and books as the reality of the welfare state: a vast mosaic of statistically correlated “facts” torn from their social, political and historical contexts.

If, for example, one examines the rather extensive literature on those living beneath the poverty line in Scandinavia, one finds table after table showing how little money the poor possess, how few belongings they own, and how many benefits of consumer society are denied them. Statistics describe in minute detail how little space they inhabit, the poor quality of the air they breathe, the food they eat and the poor architectonic and budgetary qualities of the schools for their children. Yet, despite the wealth of these numerical data, I know of no study describing in grim and living detail the worlds of pain experienced on a day-to-day basis by the poor. I am sorry to say that there exist today no Scandinavian equivalents of Bourdieu’s *The Weight of the World* (1999) or Liebow’s *Tally’s Corner: A Study*

of *Negro Streetcorner Men* (1967).<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps the saddest thing about this and other deficiencies in our knowledge about those groups who by rights ought to be the prime beneficiaries of welfare state programs is the fact that those providing these and other mountains of data can never be faulted for failing to satisfy the requirements of validity and reliability demanded by the ideal of what research methodology ought to be. On first inspection, there appear to be a number of factors accounting for the longstanding dominance of quantitative methods in welfare state research. One obvious reason is that numerical truth claims are often perceived as being more precise and objective than other claims. For politicians, welfare bureaucrats and others involved in policy-making bodies, quantitative methods provide what appear to be exact measurements of the size and scope of social problems. With respect to policy formation and change, quantitative methods appear to furnish relatively fast and cheap answers to questions about living standards, life problems and the operations of welfare state agencies. Yet, the question arises, are there other factors unrelated to issues of economy, quantification, ease of coding of data, and the like accounting for the dominance of quantitative approaches to investigations of the welfare state?

One explanation, I believe, involves political and historical processes having very little to do with the usual methodological questions of validity, reliability, analysis and so on. In exploring these processes, one starting point is found in a famous critique of quantitative methods. In my reading of the bulk of the research literature produced about the Norwegian welfare state, its clients and its professionals, I am constantly reminded of Herbert Blumer's devastating attack levelled against Samuel Stouffer's four-volume work about American soldiers in WWII (see, for example, Blumer 1951). These volumes entitled *The American Soldier* were based on a survey of a half million soldiers carried out by a legion of researchers under Stouffer's direction. Their findings were presented as a thoroughgoing assessment of the mental and emotional lives of those serving in the US armed forces from 1941 to 1945. But, to paraphrase Blumer, who himself had been a soldier during WWII, though these four volumes were a masterpiece of quantitative methodology, they unfortunately told us nothing about *the* American soldier (Smith, 2004).

This, however, was not a view shared by Paul Lazarsfeld, who was so enamoured Stouffer's work that he and Robert Merton co-edited a text devoted to extolling its research methods (Merton, Lazarsfeld, 1950). Lazarsfeld demands particular attention here because he came to exert tremendous influence on the development of welfare state research in Norway, Sweden and elsewhere in Western Europe in the decades following WWII. As part of the intellectual colonization of Western Europe by the United States during this period, he came to Norway where he was not merely a visiting professor on the periphery of departmental affairs. According to a recent memoir by Professor Thomas Mathiesen, Lazarsfeld was much involved in the process of finding a chair for the new department of sociology at the University of Oslo. Mathiesen, who earlier had studied sociology in the US, further recalls this period by noting:

...I had found an intellectually extremely inspiring sociology in the US. It

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12 In 1995, Tally's Corner was the most read ethnographic monograph in the history of anthropology. At that time, it had sold more than 700,000 copies (Massing, 1995, 34).

certainly existed. However, I don't think we got the best part of it when it conquered Europe and Norway. Looking back we can see what it was: a part of an American cultural conquest of post-war Europe (Mathiesen, 2005).

As part of his work as a methodological missionary to the natives of the emerging social science faculties in Oslo, Lazarsfeld authored a treatise for Norwegian students entitled "What is Sociology" (1948). I strongly suspect many of older – and younger – social scientists have been inspired in their careers as I have been by C. Wright Mills' *The Sociological Imagination* (1959). But I doubt that many are aware that this book was Mills' direct rebuttal of Lazarsfeld's sermon-like pronouncements made to the Norwegians about the nature of sociology and social scientific research. Lazarsfeld's main commandment was that there was only one god – and its name was quantitative survey research. This mode of investigation, he proclaimed, represented the one true way toward understanding society. His vision of social science was one framing it as a collection of "facts" and statistically validated correlations about society.

In *The Sociological Imagination*, Mills took these pronouncements and demonstrated how the detached and free-floating "facts" yielded by the narrow approach of Lazarsfeld and his disciples erased wider social and historical contexts. Moreover, Mills pointed out:

...It is usual to say that what they produce is true if unimportant. I do not agree with this; more and more I wonder how true it is...If you have seriously studied, for a year or two, some thousand of hour-long interviews, carefully coded and punched, you will have begun to see how very malleable the realm of 'fact' may really be (1959, 85).

In arguing against what he called the "abstracted empiricism" of these methods, Mills envisaged instead a social science employing a diversity of methods, some qualitative and some quantitative, for exploring the interrelationships between "the personal troubles of milieu" and "the public issues of social structure" (Mills, 1959, 14). This approach, Mills maintained, provided researchers with

...the capacity to shift from one perspective to another – from the political to the psychological; from examination of a single family to comparative assessments of the national budgets of the world; from the theological school to the military establishment; from considerations of an oil industry to studies of contemporary poetry. It is the capacity to range from the most impersonal and remote transformations to the most intimate features of the human self – and to see the relations between the two (1959, 13-14).

For Mills, this kind of flexible research strategy represented an alternative to rigidity, narrowness and shallowness of Lazarsfeldian social science: a discipline whose practitioners trapped themselves in what Mills called "the grip of methodological inhibition" where they would "refuse to say anything about modern society unless it had been through the fine

little mill of the Statistical Ritual”(Mills, 1959, 85; Converse, Schuman, 1974). In retrospect, however, it is clear that Lazarsfeld’s model for conducting research won the battle and came to determine for decades how welfare systems were to be studied in Norway and elsewhere.

Though Mills lost that particular fight, today it seems that he and those inspired by his writings are in the process of winning the war. A number of commentators have suggested, for example, that the field of cultural studies with its focus on history, biography and linkages between micro-level troubles and macro-level structures developed in the UK in the immense vacuum left by a narrowly defined sociology in the stranglehold of British abstracted empiricists (see, for example, Aronowitz 2000; Langman 2000). Writing a decade ago, I provided a numerical measure of the narrowness and pettiness of an American social science dominated by practitioners focusing on statistical correlations of ”facts” torn from contexts (Seltzer 1995). In the period from 1936 to 1982 – one witnessing the near collapse of capitalism, massive unemployment, waves of strikes, the rise of fascism, World War II, the Cold War, civil rights movements, challenges to patriarchal hegemony, the Viet Nam war and global anti-imperialist protests, only 5.1 percent of articles in the *American Sociological Review* – the official journal of the American Sociological Association – dealt with these developments. During these five decades of turmoil and wide sweeping social change, the single topic receiving most attention in the journal was the decidedly non-controversial issue of mate selection (Wilner, 1985). Similarly, political behaviour – typically defined by Lazarsfeld and other abstracted empiricists as that which happens in the voting booth – received massive attention by American political scientists in the period 1959 to 1969. Yet, during this ten-year period, only one of the 924 articles published in the three leading journals of American political science dealt with Viet Nam (Ricci, 1984, 197).

In reviewing the contours of the literature on the welfare state in Scandinavia – the region I know best, it is obvious that abstracted empiricism and statistical rituals dominated research for decades. This owed in no small part to another form of American imperialism where bright young students from the colonies were brought to the motherland for advanced training before sent back as it were to become a social scientific compradors in their home countries. A generation of Norwegian and Swedish sociologists (for example, Zetterberg) received their polishing at Lazarsfeld’s Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia. This same university, it has to be said to its discredit, never allowed Mills teach graduate students, even at the height of his reputation (Becker, 1994). It seems that Mills’ ideas – particularly his vision for a critical social science focused on the interplay between personal troubles and public issues of social structure – were adjudged by the powers that be as too dangerous for future social scientists.

As one who spoke to power, Mills was and continues to be dangerous. Though 40 years old, his *The Power Elite* (1956) easily serves as an up-to-date guidebook for understanding the nexus between corporate capitalism, militarism and political power in the US we are today witnessing in the age of Rumsfeld, Halliburton, and countless interventions of the US military around the world. The rage voiced by Cubans towards US foreign policy recorded four decades ago in Mills’ *Listen Yankee* (1960) resound thunderously today in the Middle and Far East, Latin America and elsewhere. Likewise his picture of a progressively

proletarianised and alienated middle class in *White Collar* (1951) is a prophetic one in today's era of outsourcing, downsizing and other aspects of what the Mills-inspired sociologist Katherine Newman has perceptively described as the withering of the American Dream (1993).

In quarantining Mills and others such as Robert Lynd, Lazarsfeld and his disciples – in the US and Western Europe as well – were then freer to make abstracted empiricism synonymous with research. In this way it was rendered safe. As Lauren Langman recently put it, a social science not infected by Mills was thus able to develop and reign - one which:

...ignored questions of classes, power, inequality, alienation, conflict, change and most of all, the life experiences of actual people-especially poor and/or marginal people. At the same time, mini-empires of grant funded research, led by „managers of the mind”, well trained in „scientific methods” of sampling and analysis, moved sociological research from its original concerns to an obsessive gathering of isolated, de-contextualized factoids (2000).

Aided by the Marshall Plan and other forms of American intellectual colonization of Europe, this describes the general contours of what I encountered upon coming to Norway 30 years ago. Sociology then was understood to be the science of data collection guided by the spurious „objectivity” of abstracted empiricism while social anthropology was understood as the science of exotic peoples. And much of this kind of thinking still stands in the way of researchers wishing to carry out participant observational studies of welfare state agencies.

One reason I have devoted so much time to this description is to underscore that investigations of the welfare state do not occur in a “value free” vacuum free from historical and political influences. In planning, proposing and gaining funding for investigations of the structure and dynamics of welfare state, the first rule is to be aware of the resistance to be encountered – especially among those institutions and individuals whose careers and funding are bound up with allegiance to particular methods and theoretical models threatened by proposed research.

One consequence of this in Norway – and I strongly suspect elsewhere in Scandinavia and Western Europe – is that I know of only a handful of studies privileging qualitative methods of data collection. As a hard and fast rule, funding invariably goes to proposed studies of welfare systems presenting quantitative research designs. If qualitative methods are at all mentioned, they are invariably presented as an adjunct to the quantitative thrust of the research project. Thus when seeking funding in the early 1990s to conduct observations of encounters between debt defaulters and financial counsellors at three social work agencies, it was necessary to package this in a proposal to conduct a nationwide questionnaire based survey of 512 social agencies in Norway (Seltzer, 2003; Seltzer et al. 1995).

Though some observers (e.g., Denzin 2002; Denzin and Lincoln 2000) claim that qualitative methods now compete on equal footing with quantitative ones in social welfare



research, there is little evidence this development has taken place in Scandinavia. Given these kinds of obstacles confronting qualitative researchers, a rational question would be: What is to be gained by approaching the welfare state from the standpoint of a participant observer? One answer to this question is contained in the supplement. All the writings presented there share a perspective best summed up, I feel, in Erving Goffman's methodological credo introducing *Asylums*:

It was then and still is my belief that any group of persons – prisoners, primitives, pilots, or patients – develop a life of their own that becomes meaningful, reasonable, and normal once you get close to it, and that a good way to learn about any of these worlds is to submit oneself in the company of the members to the daily round of petty contingencies to which they are subject (1961, x)

There is considerable variation in the degree to which observing and participating investigators “get close to” those involved in the many arenas of the welfare states. In doing field work with recovering substance abusers in Hungary, I once again experienced that complete participation in the lives of those one works with exerts a high price in carrying out the work required of ethnographic description. At the same time, the role of complete observer behind the one-mirror of a family therapy clinic severely limits the degree of closeness an investigator may experience in relation to those being studied.

Yet despite these hindrances and practical problems of fieldwork, there is considerable evidence that participant observational approaches to welfare services, their professional helpers and their clients work to thaw the frozen portraits of the welfare state dominating the literature. Responses to questionnaires, no matter how well designed, provide knowledge about extremely narrow and tiny slices of welfare state operations –frozen in time and space. Similarly, structured interviews with professional helpers and those seeking help from welfare agencies though providing valuable insights tend to lock these actors in frozen postures. As a result the welfare state appears all too often in the literature as a static thing having well-defined structures, functions and measurable effects. However, this locked and sharp edged picture begins to dissolve once investigators “get close to”, listen to and observe what goes on in the many arenas sorting under the rubric *The Welfare State*.

Through participation in and observation of welfare systems, investigators are provided with a kind of upfront immersion capturing many of the flows, dynamics and crosscurrents of welfare state operations. These approaches provides as well tightly focused perspectives enabling researchers to trace the links between the personal troubles and issues in clients' lives and problems of social structure in society at large. These ways of approaching welfare arenas and carrying out research yield I believe a number of important insights. But this kinds of findings often stand at odds with what many quantitatively oriented research projects have to say about the welfare state in Norway and – as far as I have been able to see – in other parts of Western Europe as well.

Central among the insights yielded by qualitative research is one first formulated decades ago by Herbert Tingsten, editor of *Dagens Nyheter*, Sweden's highly respected

newspaper. Tingsten, a perennial gadfly on the radical left of Swedish social democracy, constantly reminded his readers that the greatest enemies of the welfare state are those who proclaim the welfare state has been achieved. Tingsten's view of the welfare state as a something developing rather than developed is very much a part of the perspective qualitative research provides about the many arenas where clients meet welfare professionals. By participating in and observing these encounters it is extremely difficult not to see that the welfare state is unfinished, lacking closure and constantly coming into being.

By not conceiving of the welfare state as a finished entity, but rather as a gigantic mosaic of different processes, this then requires developing ways of approaching and grasping its fluid and ever-shifting dynamics. The notion of process as the core feature of welfare states demands abandonment of viewing them as static entities. Instead, it requires moving the focus of research away from traditional framings of welfare agencies as black boxes with human inputs and outputs having definite structures and functions. In its place, the focus of research needs to be one capable of grasping processes of evolution and involution, progress and stagnation, actions and reactions, happenings and unfolding relations.

It is relevant in this regard to return to a basic and now classic declaration made 40 years ago by the historian and theorist Edward P. Thompson in his groundbreaking epos *The Making of the English Working Class* (1968). Though he was specifically writing about how the class can best be mentally grasped, Thompson's voice resonates with what I have been trying to say thus far about mainstream welfare state research. He begins by describing for us those

Sociologists who have stopped the time-machine and, with a great deal of conceptual huffing and puffing, have gone down to the engine-room to look, tell us nowhere at all have they been able to locate and classify a class. They can only find a multitude of people with different occupations, incomes, status hierarchies, and the rest. Of course they are right, since class is not this or that part of the machine, but *the way the machine works* once it is set in motion – not this and that interest but the *friction* of interests – the movement itself, the heat, the thundering noise. Class is a social and cultural formation (often finding institutional express) which cannot be defined abstractly, or in isolation, but only in terms of relationship with other classes; and, ultimately, the definition can only be made in the medium of *time* – that is, action and reaction, change and conflict (1965,357).

There is perhaps no better time to present my next insight with Thompson's words fresh in our minds. Here I wish to supplement the picture I have thus far sketched out of unfinished and unfolding processes with a key fact – indeed perhaps the key fact – about what welfare state systems. Contrary to the origin myths most of us have been taught, there are no fathers or mothers of the welfare state. Bismarck is not the welfare state's inventor nor is Beveridge. There is no individual responsible for the welfare state, only classes. In its origins and everyday workings, the welfare state remains a product of struggle between labour and capital. The past century's improvements in child welfare, health care, unemployment benefits, work safety, old age pensions and other developments marking the history of social and health welfare in Western Europe and elsewhere – all have been forged in the heat and fury of continual struggle between forces of progress on the one side and forces of reaction on the other.



Nowhere in this history do we find the slightest bit of evidence that ruling classes have in their benevolence bestowed as gifts to working classes systems of occupational safety, health care, pensions and the like. On the contrary, history reveals an unending string of battles and skirmishes between those classes and class fractions dominating capitalist societies and those fractions and classes resisting this domination. The history of the development of health and social welfare systems in Scandinavia and elsewhere are part and parcel of the same history of the working classes Thompson so vividly describes. In their own histories the welfare systems of all countries mirror the same dynamics: the making of each and every system is one punctuated throughout by conflicts, advances and retreats by classes locked in never-ending combat.

Extending the perspective derived from this principle still further then provides a workable framing of the multitudes of contradictions we observe and often experience firsthand in the everyday operations of welfare agencies. If the origins and development of what is understood as the welfare state is the product of conflict between forces of progress and forces of reaction, it then is not surprising that these struggles are reproduced at the micro-level in the day-to-day operations and face-to-face interactions of those spaces where health and social welfare professionals meet their clients. Seen in this way, the welfare state becomes transformed into something much more complex than a single arena of struggle. It becomes instead a massive conglomerate of many arenas where these forces impact upon one another in a multitude of ways.

Though it is doubtful whether participant observational research will ever be able to capture the many struggles, contradictions and blooming, buzzing confusion existing in welfare state agencies, it seems even less likely that the dynamics of these phenomena can be grasped by using the questionnaires and structured interviews traditionally employed by quantitatively oriented investigators. Their methods all too often freeze and stabilize in static moulds what are dynamic processes of flow, conflict and change. Though I could conclude with a cataloguing of some of the insights into these processes that participant observational methods can yield, I have chosen for the sake of brevity to touch on only one.

This returns to Mills' basic idea about developing a perspective, an imagination, for capturing the nexus between troubles experienced by individuals and the larger social systems in which they are embedded. If one is present as participant in and observer of encounters between the professional helpers of the welfare state and those seeking help, one is a witness to many forms of what can be understood as troubles talking. In studying family therapy clinics and therapeutic communities as a participant observer, one hears cultural systems and structural problems "speaking themselves" in the stories told by clients. Though the research focus of participant observational field work in welfare agencies is confined to micro-arenas, one can follow Mills' lead and use the narratives heard to trace the connections between personal troubles and larger issues involving social and cultural change (See, for example, the seminal work on cultures speaking themselves in narratives, Rosenwald & Ochberg 1992). As suggested in the findings from the clinical research, individuals and families appear to arrive at this and other agencies when traditional ways of coping no longer help them navigate and negotiate their ways through rapidly changing socio-cultural contexts (Seltzer et al 2001; Seltzer and Seltzer 2004, 1988, 1983). In their stories, we hear the failures of cultural strategies as well as the impact of problems generated by larger social

forces involving gender discrimination, poverty, economic downturns and other forms of structural violence. In a somewhat similar way, the troubles talking of recovering addicts in group therapeutic settings can provide important leads for understanding the lethal culture shared by drug users.

In these and other instances of researching the welfare state by listening to what is said in naturally occurring conversations – rather than responses to questionnaires or interviews situations – the contours of issues in the public arena needed to be addressed by welfare policies appear in much more detailed form. The troubles talking of couples in marital distress, debtors defaulting their financial obligations, unemployed women and men seeking social assistance, the poor, parents and children encountering child welfare interventions, the disabled and many more all give voice to socio-cultural systems in distress as well as the failures of institutional arrangements established by welfare policy makers to deal with these and related problems.

While the current fashion for evidence based research dovetails neatly with the mainstream approach to measuring inputs and outputs in social policy research, ethnographic approaches involving observations of and listening to helpers and clients may provide much more accurate indicators of why some policies fail and others succeed. These advantages notwithstanding, those who wish to conduct ethnographic work of the types mentioned here in welfare arenas face an uphill battle. Though qualitative research is gaining ground – as evidenced by a number of excellent ethnographic investigations of social work practices in recent years (De Montigny, 1995; Floersch 1998; Pithouse 1987; White 1997) – the past of an dominant and exclusionary quantitative methodology in welfare state research still weighs like a nightmare on those today attempting to follow in the tradition of participant observational fieldwork.

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