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CHALLENGES IN SOCIAL SERVICE PROVISION IN FINLAND

The focus of our interest is directed towards the changes that have occurred during the last decades in social services in Finland. Behind the changes we recognize the arrival of neoliberal thinking into the public administration. According to Fergusson (2009, 81–82) neoliberalism is maybe the most central phenomena connected with the provision of public social services. In different countries neoliberal ideas and politics have gotten different forms and shaped differently the forms of social work practice and services. Despite of these international discrepancies it is very clear that neoliberal ideas and politics have moved social work further and further away from its core values. Ferguson continues that the forms of social work practice that have been developed during the last twenty years are often woefully inadequate in their ability to address peoples' social needs. And they will be of even less help in responding to the much greater levels of need that we are likely to see in the near future.

In the public administration of Finland neoliberalism has taken the form of New Public Management (NPM). The core idea of NPM is to see the methods of the private sector more influential and cost-effective comparing with the traditional workings of the public sector. (Juhila 2006, 71–74; Möttönen & Niemelä 2005, 108–109.) This development has strongly affected both on the way social services are provided at the organisational level and on the working practises. In our presentation we approach this development by reviewing these effects from two different perspectives which both are tightly connected with the subjects of our PhD theses which are under construction.

The first point of view is the third sector organisations (not-for profit and non-govermental organisations) which provide social services and sell them to public sector. In Finland municipalities have the main responsibility for the organization of the social services, such as child day care, care services for the elderly and various groups in need. This task they can fulfil by providing the services themselves or buying them from private companies or other service providers. During the years the third sector organisations have had a significant role as service providers and at the same time also in developing of those services. All this they have done respecting they own principles and values and in good co-operation with the municipalities. The arrival of neoliberal politics has changed this all. Nowadays the provision of public social services is submitted to common competition and the process is carried out by following the logics of markets. This development has challenges both the identity and operational principles of the third sector organisations.

The second viewpoint is psychosocial services for families with children, more specifically child guidance and family counselling clinics. The historical development of child guidance and family counselling clinics in Finland has proceeded as follow. The first clinic was established in 1925 by the General Mannerheim League for Child Welfare (Kenraali Mannerheimin lastensuojeluliitto) nominated "The research and counselling centre for difficult children". The functional ideology of the clinic was described to be psychiatric-societal nature and the distinctive feature of the work was surveillance. In the early stages the action of the clinic can be considered to be clearly societal socializing work; "ill-mannered children" have to raise to be worthwhile citizens. This educational work was seen as a uniting element between social ranks in a society unravelled by the Civil War.

At the time child guidance clinic was sort of pioneering work until it became official function in the 1950s. In 1972 a special ”Child Guidance Clinic Law” came into effect and was considered to be one of Europe’s most progressive. In 1982 municipalities were obliged by the new social welfare law to offer child guidance and family counselling. (Linna 1988.) According to the law the mission of the child guidance and family counselling clinics is to give expert help in upbringing and family issues as well as support children’s positive development by doing social, psychological and medical examinations and giving treatment required. The child guidance and family counselling clinic has been determined throughout its history by changes in society and in families and by the contemporary demands as well as by the contextual emphasis and structural framework. The organizational work has been developed mainly in the modern times when the professions have had strong monopoly of knowledge and independent status of authority. Nowadays political, administrative and structural changes effect in many ways to the work of the child guidance and family counselling clinics and the way they are organized.

In the beginning of our presentation we describe shortly the changes the neoliberal thinking has had to the social service system in Finland. After that we consider how these changes have affected to the practise of social service provision in public sector (Child guidance and family counselling clinics) and in private sector (the third sector organisations providing social services).

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