Abstract

Title: The room, the encounter and the rituals &endash; a study on the Social Services Agency, client related work and clientship

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This is a study on the Social Services Agency, client related work and clientship. The main objective is to describe and analyse what client related work consists of, how it is carried out and what it contains. Yet another purpose is to see what is concealed behind the, at the Social Services Agency, internally used professional labels: "the handling of social assistance/financial assistance", "investigation" and "treatment" and to observe how clientship is formed and how it evolves.

The study has been carried on at two Social Services Agencies with a different organisation. The main emphasis is on a number of core issues, which were regarded as common to all client related work. The study has been carried on with an ethnographical approach and the starting-point was to answer the question: "what is it that really happens at the Social Services Agency?". Observations have been combined with interviews with clients and social workers, with focused interviews, with informal conversations and with subsequent follow-up conversations with the social workers in immediate connection with a concluded client appointment (a form of "reflexion parlÈe"). The study focuses on the process and follows the clients (62) over time and along their way through "the system". The analysis has not started from/been based on a specific theory, but different theories and theoretical perspectives have entered the process at different stages. Principally three perspectives &endash; interaction, organisation and power &endash; showed to be relevant and efficient for the interpretation and understanding of what took place on the arena.

Even though the Social Services Agency is an open activity, it has some of the total institution's characteristic features. It is in its formation administrative and controlling, which shows in the physical environment and in the rites of passage that the client must go through in order to gain access. The division of the premises in external rooms and internal locked rooms, to which the clients do not have free access, can be seen as a part of a domestication process and a disciplinary process. The disciplinary power is in the division and distribution of the room and the time, in the differentiation of the activities, in the organisation of the work and in the rituals that have developed. This is an expression of the disciplinary process of both clients and employees.

Client related work has revealed to be strikingly dualistic: an administrative process where you abide by laws, administrative regulations and routines and an assisting process, which contains the assistance the client receives in terms of money and/or other material aid, advice, support and/or treatment. The processes are associated with two contradictory attitudes: an
administrative/controlling attitude and a more personal/relational attitude. To combine these two sides to client related work appears to be easier in the beginning of the process and the better the client fits into the administrative system. The further the client gets into the system the more the roles are divided in an administrative/controlling attitude or a supportive/"treating" attitude. In financial assistance cases, the administrative attitude is predominant, while the supportive attitude is predominant in other kinds of investigations. In treatment cases, the roles are almost completely separated.

Clientship is formed in the encounter and interaction with the Social Services Agency and its representatives. The clientization process begins at the initial contact and starts with a number of admission procedures, which indicate the beginning of the client's "new" moral career. The client goes through an adaptation process, which contains different attitudes and behaviours, which not take place without a certain resistance. The client's reactions could be compared to the adaptation attitudes that can be observed with the inmates on a total institution: situational withdrawal, intransigent line, colonization and conversion. To try to please is rewarded by the system.