

Stream #30

Social Workers and Social Policy: Policy Takers or Policy Makers?

Conveners:

- John Gal, Hebrew University of Jerusalem
- Agnieszka Zogata Kusz, Palacký University Olomouc
- Idit Weiss-Gal, Tel Aviv University

Social workers are the professionals most associated with the implementation of social policy and the provision of services by the welfare state. Drawing on a growing body of knowledge that is both innovative and important to better understanding social policy formulation, this stream will seek to challenge existing assumptions concerning the role of members of this profession in the social policy formulation process in diverse welfare regimes.

Members of the social work profession have traditionally been perceived as the implementers of social policy formulated by political or bureaucratic decision-makers. As such, they have not been the subject of much attention in the social policy discourse. Yet an emerging body of empirical data from diverse countries and theoretical discussions have indicated that the relationship between policy and social work practice is more complex and less clear-cut than the accepted notion that social workers are street-level bureaucrats lacking the capacity, knowledge, political power, motivation or agency to impact policymaking processes. Studies undertaken by scholars within social work, public administration, political science and sociology that have focused on social workers on various policy levels have shown that they indeed play a policy role. This can take the form of discretion by street-level bureaucrats and efforts by social workers within local government and third-sector service providers to advance policy better addressing the needs of their service-users. Policy efforts can also be adopted by street-level policy entrepreneurs or social work managers seeking to impact policies within social services. Similarly, in collaboration with services users, social workers can seek to critically challenge existing policies and institutions and seek to further structural change. Finally, social workers holding national-level policy-making positions within elected bodies, the state bureaucracy, professional organizations or civil society advocacy bodies can play major policy-formulation roles in public debates and policy deliberations.

The goal of this stream is to explore the policy role of the members of this professional group who serve as key actors in the institutions that are central to social policy implementation. We are eager to learn about what is the current state of cutting- edge knowledge concerning the social policy-social work nexus, to think about the implications of this for policy and practice, and to consider directions for further research and discourse. We seek to discuss what social workers' policy role is, the forms that this takes and its content, and what are the implications of this for social policy and our understanding how, and by whom, it is formulated. As such, scholars from different disciplines are invited to address the role of social workers in social policies by submitting empirical abstracts presenting research employing diverse methodologies or theoretical abstracts that discuss facets of this topic.