

The “Contractual Turn” of Social Citizenship – Social work as an agent of Activation Policy in Finland

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The paper analyzes the “contractual turn” of social work and welfare service clienthood in Finland. The theoretical argument is built on the idea of social citizenship, presented first in T. H. Marshall’s lecture *Citizenship and Social Class*. Contrary to the contract based and market oriented ideology of 18th and 19th century liberalism, Marshall defined his idea of modern liberal society by referring to status as a principle of citizenship. By defining citizenship as “a status bestowed on those who are full members of society”, he also underlined the principle of social equality and the importance of treating citizens according to their human value instead of market value.

In the empirical part of the paper these theoretical ideas are reflected to the context of modern social work promoting “active citizenship”. Because of the prominence of neoliberal dichotomy between passive vs. active citizenship, and principle of status vs. contract, there is strong pressure in social work to transform its client relationships into a contractual form. In everyday social work practices the contractual clienthood is advanced in multiprofessional groups as well as in vague and often individual “agreements” between workers and clients. The widening use of service vouchers and increasing market competition in production of welfare services also support this trend.

Despite increasing freedom and choice of many well off citizens, the negative outcomes of this trend pinpoint to the population in the target of activation policies. In general the contractual turn of social work clienthood makes social rights conditional and vague, thus weakening the citizenship position of most fragile human beings, and paving the way to increasing inequality. Secondly favoring contractual client relationships is an individualizing trend. Professionally this is restricting for social work, since group- and community social work, and creating partnerships with of civil society, are often the most efficient working methods when fighting against poverty and exclusion.