Age gap – governance gap

- troubled transitions from childhood to independent adult life

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Introduction

The fragmentation of, and the lack of coordination in welfare bureaucracies has gained much attention in most western countries, with Norway being no exception (Bogason, 1996, Webb 1991, Hvinden, 1994). However, most of these discussions have focused on the fragmentation due to problematic and professional specialization i.e. vertical specialization. This paper discusses the specialization of the welfare bureaucracy according to the age of the service user. This article illuminates the problem with the fragmentation of the Norwegian health and welfare system into one system for children and one for adults and specifies the gaps and the potential troubles they create for both young adults and service workers. Based on interviews with eleven young adults we especially draw attention to three problematics were the age gap/ governance gap creates difficulties.

Background

In Norway the employment and national insurance administration was merged and a formal collaboration agreement was signed with the local government social services administration. The outcome was the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Service (Nav), and the purpose of the reform was to make the sectors more user- friendly, more holistic and more efficient. Christensen, Fimreite and Lægreid (2007: 390) labels the reform a ‘whole-of-government’ initiative intended to address ‘wicked problems’.

In Norway the age of 18 draws a line for where care ends or care begins. Young people who have been living in out-of-home placements usually exit care when they turn 18;
while young people with learning disabilities usually enter residential care after turning 18. Hence, while some young people ‘age out of care’, others ‘age into care’.

In this study we have interviewed young people who have just turned 18, some of their parents, as well as service workers from various welfare services. The two groups of young people in our study share some characteristics, and are divided by others. Both groups have been in close contact with public services throughout their childhood. Both groups have low educational attainment and high likelihood of being marginalized in the labour market. Both groups are being ‘transferred to Norwegian Labour and Welfare Service (Nav)’ when turning 18.

*Transition* is the term that scholars often use to describe the adolescents movement towards adulthood: the stages and changes involved in the process of becoming an adult. In Norway most service units separates service users between people below and above the year of 18. The age of 18, which in Norway is the age of Majority, however it is a social construction that has changed over time. Hence, discussing the usefulness of this age as a dividing line in the welfare bureaucracy is important. Drawing on findings from a recently completed research study funded by Fylkesmannen i Nordland, this paper evaluates how young people ageing in and out of care experience the process of emerging adulthood.

**Methods and material**

The article is based on data from a research project on the transition of young adults who have been in the service system throughout most part of their childhood, either in child protection services or various habilitation services. The material consists of eleven qualitative semi-structured interviews with young adults and (in some cases) their parents and thirteen semi-structured interviews with service workers from various service units. The interviews with the young adults and their parents have a biographical character, while the interviews with the service workers are oriented towards the “problematic” found in the interviews with the young adults. The focus of the interviews was to investigate what happens in the Norwegian welfare bureaucracy when young people turn 18. The interviews generally lasted for an hour, were recorded and transcribed. The language used in the
fieldwork is Norwegian, therefore we have translated the quotes and adjusted them to spoken English.

The research project was approved by the Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD), who had no objections. We applied for, and gained research permit from all three municipalities involved. We have secured the informants’ anonymity by giving them fictitious names, unspecific work titles, approximate age, and not referring to which municipality they live or work in.

The participants were recruited after a three-step model. The first step was to gain access to municipalities and get in contact with administrators and managers who could point us in the right directions regarding young people to interview. We contacted five municipalities, and in three of these administrators and managers were able to lead us to service workers, who in turn assisted us in recruiting young people who wanted to participate. Two of the municipalities participating was large in a Norwegian scale, while the third is middle-scale. Step three was to interview service workers and administrators working in the field. We evaluate the outcome of the recruitment as good, not meaning that we have a representative material, but that we have managed to include dispersion and variety among our participants. However, young women were over-represented in this study (9 of 11) which possibly reflects their greater willingness to participate in research (Wigfall and Cameron 2006).

The analysis of the material grew out of an abductive process of shifting between empirical and theoretical work (Blaikie 2000). Following the method of institutional ethnography (Smith 2005), we started our inquiry with the lived experiences and everyday lives of young people. Our aim was to understand, from their standpoint, how they had experienced the transitions from childhood to independent adult living, and to bring into view the policies and administrative systems influencing their lives.

**Governance gaps**

Collins and Pinkerton (2008: 1280) claims that the body of literature describing youths transition to independent living ‘can be criticized for its greater emphasis on intrapsychic and interpersonal systems to the neglect of attending to the efforts of the larger systems. Theoretical frameworks which can focus on these larger systems must become a part of thinking about young people’s transition from state care’. This article will therefore
illuminate the problems in the system, partly based on fragmentation, which we may call governance gaps (Pierre 1998 referring to Pierce). These gaps may be characterized as problems of governability and are often caused by organizational insufficiency and lack of inter-organizational coordination (Pierre 2011).

Institutional theory would explain these gaps as contending forms of governance among different segments of local government, for example administrators engaged in economic matters versus social workers who relate to their external environment in ways more akin to professional governance (Pierre 2011). The gaps occur because of differences in priorities, objectives and strategies between different segments of local government (Pierre 1998). However, sometimes the gaps occur because responsibilities are fragmented among local government actors, which we will illustrate in this paper.

**Research on care-leavers**

The system of aftercare has a long history in Norway. The Child Protection Law from 1954 stated that the children had rights to aftercare until they were 23. In the Child Protection Law from 1993 the age limit was reduced 20 years, but again raised to 23 in 1998. Research show that young people who get aftercare services are more likely to succeed in life than young people who do not (Bakketeig og Backe-Hansen 2008; Kristofersen 2009). Among other things the chances of completing higher education increased by 36% for youth who had been in aftercare services, also they had lower risks of unemployment. Collins and Pinkerton (2008: 1285) states that ‘transition-oriented services are inherently community-based; success in leaving care require the development, maintenance and negotiation of community based services, resources, and networks. Furthermore, while concrete assistance from statutory authorities in the form of housing, education, and employment are central to the well-being of youth care, access to youth services providing positive developmental experiences can facilitate the intrapersonal and interpersonal competency needed for a full and productive life’. As Collins and Pinkerton (2008: 1279) states: ‘Successful or unsuccessful outcomes are dependent on the processes and structures that make up the external environment in which young people have to find a means to cope with their varied life tasks’.

In the US the term emerging adulthood is widely used which to a larger degree. Using such a concept may diminish the gap between services for children and services for adults.
The transitions from childhood to adulthood is already less standardized in Norway today than they were earlier (Hammer og Hyggen 2013). Youth growing up with their parents usually have a right to regret their decision about moving out, a right many youth living in institutions or foster care lack. The transitions are therefore more risky. In some ways this may be particularly difficult in Norway with a labour market known for high intensity and a large knowledge-based service sector. Getting a job without education is difficult.

**Experiences of the young adults**

The young people we have interviewed all report on troubled experiences about turning 18 and establishing an independent adult life. Many of them also dreaded the fact that they were turning 18 and therefore be on their own. Mia describes it this way: ‘The worst thing that could happen to me was to turn 18, so I had planned not to become 18, because then my life would be over, I knew that, because I needed a lot of help, I knew that ok, I can get support until I’m 23, but they can also turn me down and say no, we don’t want you anymore. I am very afraid of broken relations and...so turning 18 was the worst thing that could happen to me. I didn’t understand why people looked forward to becoming 18. I could always drink anyway, and I still haven’t got my drivers license so...I was really dreading it’.

Also Petter’s mother says that he was afraid of turning 18 because he knew he would have to move out from his parents’ house and that the assistants he had would be replaced by new ones: ‘it was very scary for him to turn 18, he knew he had to be an adult. He needs a lot of adjustment’.

Many of the young people were disappointed about the way the child protection services had ended their contact. Marte explains that ‘Just at that point of time I got a telephone from the child protection services, saying that they wouldn’t have anything more to do with me. I didn’t get any support from them and I felt that I was..., that I had to manage on my own. I was only 18 and I was living alone. It was such strange news, or a strange idea getting used to, who was I to turn to, who could I talk to?’ Many of them miss some sort of ending of the relationship to the child protection services. Stine puts it this way: ‘I didn’t get any closure, it would be nice to have closure. I am the kind of person who don’t cope so well when things end too quickly, I need it to happen gradually’. Also Mia has
thoughts about this: ‘I think that I get too attached to people, which becomes very traumatic when a relation gets broken’.

Some of them explained how they tried to behave and tried to do what were expected of them. Mia for example says that ‘I thought a lot about being 18, I felt the threat that if I do not cooperate they can kick me out’. However, some of the young adults in the large municipalities had contact with ‘leaving care officers’, who were the most frequently person turned to for support and many care leavers cited them as their closest key worker. The aim of the paper is to illuminate some of the causes of these experiences that are caused by structural factors, or characteristics of the service systems. We divide these gaps in three areas; gaps between municipalities, gaps within systems of one municipality and gaps between systems within the municipalities.

**Governance gaps between municipalities**

When children are placed in foster home, they are normally not placed in homes in their home-municipality. During their childhood, the former home-municipality is the responsible actor, and the actor the foster-parents can turn to. When they turn 18, they are still the responsibility of the home-municipality until they turn 23, if they want to receive services. This often proves difficult for the young adults because the home-municipality is not necessarily so close geographically, and sometimes they are ‘in opposition’ to the child protection services of their home-municipality. Also the service workers acknowledge this problem. One therapist at an institution talked about this as a problem: ‘the problem is that if you move from the municipality were you have your ’aftercare’ rights, you lose your rights’. Also the child protection services acknowledge the problem: ‘As the care-municipality you have a responsibility for the youth until they are 23. But it is not usual to acquire responsibility from another municipality when they are over 18’. One service worker at Nav talked about a young boy who came to them from another municipality: ‘There were no documents with him, no written decisions, it was very odd since this was a boy who have received a lot of support from various services. It makes it very hard for us here at Nav, when there are no documents that follows him’.
**Governance gaps between service systems**

The child protection services and Nav can be seen as two different service systems, with separate funding and economic resources. For child protection services; having man young adults on aftercare is expensive. Nav on the other hand, does not want to take responsibility for persons who they think should be under aftercare services from child protection services. For the young people it feels like they are pushed between the sectors, which they find unpleasant. Lars tells us about this ‘They (child protection services) tried to send me to Nav all the time and I refused to... they are still trying to. So I am going up there now and break up with them... to put it that way’. He did not want to receive services from Nav, because he found it stigmatizing, however the child protection services could not offer him the financial aid he needed. Kathrine states that ‘I was stuck in the middle, I wish there was a place in the middle that were independent. There is no place in the middle’.

For the young people with learning disabilities, the story is quite different. For them getting welfare benefits ‘was was no problem at all’ as Sofie’s mother puts it. The problem for this group is to find a job. According to Sofie’s mother Nav said: ‘if you manage to find a job for her, we can help you with the paperwork’. She continues; ‘I think about all those years of schooling; you practice and you practice, and then suddenly when you are finished, you are sent out in limbo, no jobs, nothing to do. The day the gates of the schoolyard is closed, you have nothing in front of you. You are educated to welfare benefits’.

The child protection services uses contracts that the young people at 18 have to sign where it is stated what kind of help they want from the them. One service worker at Nav suspected that it was very difficult for the young people to know what they signed up for: ‘The child protection services makes the youth sign a contract stating that they are done with the services they get from them and the financial support. I even had one boy who had to sign this contract at his 18th birthday. I think it is way too soon that they bring them here at 18, they should all have been 23. You have to stand on your own two feet, who’s gonna pay your rent now? I think that the child protection services are very eager to send the youth to us, now you belong to Nav, you are their responsibility now’.
Governance gaps within service systems

Research findings indicate that housing is widely recognized as a key priority for young people, being ‘the life area most closely associated with mental well-being, outstripping the contribution made by involvement in education and training’ (Wade and Dixon 2006: 203). Housing is however, even in Norway, a problem for people who have a hard time finding housing on the private market. Especially for the young people with learning disabilities, there is a lack of housing in many municipalities (Eide and Breimo, 2013). Solveig’s mother says this ‘We sent in an application for housing when she was 17, but the answer we got was that we wouldn’t get anything until she was at least 24. I use to say to people that having a ‘child like that’ is no problem before they turn 18’. Also Petter’s mother is struggling to find a home for her son: ‘we were promised housing many years ago, but he still lives at home’. Housing is the responsibility of the municipality, although there is no individual right to housing (Kjellevold 2012) and so far little discussion exists about this problematic. There is a gap between leaving parents homes, foster homes or institutions and supplying housing for young people emerging adulthood.
Conclusion

What young people who have received child protection services and young people with learning disabilities have in common is that they need stable relations and smooth transitions. This makes them especially vulnerable to governance gaps, because this often involves insecurity, shifting of service workers and periods of time when it feels like they have no one to turn to. Young adults with learning disabilities often have parents to guide them through this transition, although it demands a lot of work from the parents. Many young adults who have been in care do not have these stable relations to guide them through the transition. A lot of research has been conducted on these turbulent transitions, however, scholars have paid far too little attention to the governance gaps that may make the transitions even more troublesome. This also points to the need of having one service worker to guide the young people through the transition.


**Literature**


