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"Self-Interest, Social Welfare Policy and Social Problems"

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Three propositions are explored in this paper which tie the connection between social welfare policy and social problems to the construct of pursuit of self-interest. The first is that self-interest (i.e., "self" as individual, group or organization) is a dynamic in social welfare policy formulation. The second proposition is that our characterization of the welfare exchange as a unilateral transfer obscures the inter-relationship between social welfare policy and social problems and that, rather, the social welfare exchange is bilateral. The third proposition is that perception of newly-found self-interests in alternative policies provides incentives to support new policy options. This conceptualization has useful implications for achieving egalitarian rearrangements in a social system. Some examples are provided below, after a discussion of the propositions.

Ideally, one might generally assume that there is a constructive relationship between the societal recognition of its social problems and the social welfare policies which give shape to its social welfare programs. However, it is hard to find any comprehensive theory of social problems and social welfare policy. Merton and Nisbet have observed on three occasions over the last decade that a comprehensive theory of social problems does not exist (Kitsuse and Spector, 1973: 407). Neither does one find a comprehensive theory of social welfare policy. Yet, in a modern society ostensibly committed to rational and democratic problem solving, the connection between social policy appears more serendipitous than planned.

Public and private social welfare programs are generally aimed at providing some consensual minimum standard of health and decency. Such programs are commonly assumed to be unilateral transfers of wealth from one population category to another, generally from the "top downward". The recognition of "upward transfers" has only recently received any popular recognition (Stern, 1973; Tussing, 1974) and the identification of reciprocal exchanges in welfare relationships has only recently received scholarly analysis (Pruger, 1973).

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This writer assumes that there is a reciprocal interdependence between the providers and the receivers of social welfare programs and explores one particular aspect of that exchange. A proposition explored here is that self-interest is a dynamic in social welfare policy formulation and that such a dynamic is founded on the basic assumption of reciprocal interdependence. The perception of newly-found self-interests obtainable in alternative social welfare policy options is examined here as a factor in inducing purposive policy change.

It is proposed here that the common characterization of the welfare relationship as a unilateral transfer has obscured the connection between the problem and policy. The late Richard Titmuss refers to social policy as relating to unilateral transfers (e.g., grants or gifts) and economic policy as relating to markets and exchanges and bilateral transfers (Titmuss, 1968: 22). On the contrary, conceptualizing the welfare relationship as being comprised of reciprocal exchanges forces us to look at the bilateral nature of policy benefits with social and economic policy being inseparable. Inasmuch as "downward" redistributive policies have received abundant attention, and while not denying the efficacy and promise of exploring the distributive effects of "upward" transfers, this paper will focus on the possibility that there are incentives held by those population categories who are in positions to influence policy change and who, coincidentally and concomitantly, are beneficiaries in provider roles.

The identification of those incentives which relate favorably to newly-found self-interests may hold some promise for a more equitable distribution of the burden of social problems and the benefits of social welfare policies. It is proposed here that policy change is likely to occur when those in advantaged positions are able to perceive newly-found self-interests and support the associated new policy options. This "principle of substitution" (see Zeckhauser and Shaeffer, 1968: 43) or principle of willingness, founded on the perception of self-interest, may provide a dynamic for policy change in situations where inequality and/or repressive policies heretofore relied only upon moral exhortation or legislative or judicial mandate for egalitarian relief.

SELF-INTEREST: THE EFFICACY OF THE CONCEPT

The fields of social problems and social welfare policy are often thought to be ordered by the moral or humanistic motivations of those who legislate and/or manage the welfare system. The welfare system has also been observed to be influenced by the social control functions performed (Flynn, 1973). There is also considerable literature supporting the notion that "social" problems and the pursuit of policy solutions are related to another dynamic, i.e., the incentives associated with self-interest. We will now survey some of the "self-interest literature". Although reality is not neatly divisible into economic, political and social theory, the following section will provide the survey in that order, following an observation on social problems theory.

Social Problems Theory. Kitsuse and Spector reject the traditional social disorganization and value-conflict approaches to the study of social problems and offer a process approach to the subject. They view social problems as "the activities of groups making assertions of grievances and claims" with respect to some putative conditions. (Spector and Kitsuse, 1973; see also Ross and Staines, 1972). They argue that the subject matter of a process approach contains three elements: a theory of moral indignation, a theory of natural history, (Spector and Kitsuse, 1972) and a theory of interests, since:

any of the groups that participate in the process of definition do so in order to pursue or protect their own social, political, economic and other interests.
(Kitsuse and Spector, 1973: 418).

Economic Theory. The literature of classical utilitarianism (as with, say, Jeremy Bentham) is entirely consonant with this view; that is, the main proposition is that, generally speaking, the greatest social good would be produced by pursuit of self-interest. Here, self-interest is seen as the dynamic explaining social action and the rationale for self-directed behavior and goal-seeking. (Heilbroner, 1967: 116-22 and Mencher, 1967: 63). Even Marx (albeit from the perspective of class consciousness) said that there was "a social class that was forced by the conditions of its daily life to fight for a self-interest which was also the common interest of mankind". (Harrington, 1972: 13).

Compare that view with the Hobbesian contention that "each member of society had a self-interest in limiting the unbridled egotism of his neighbors". (Harrington, 1972: 35). In this same context (i.e., that self-interest is the very warp or woof of the social fabric), Mencher recalled that classical capitalism, in the person of Adam Smith, insisted that self-interest motivations were "the foundations of social responsibility". (Mencher, 1967: 67).

Political Theory. Political theory is, perhaps, a more prolific source of interest-oriented literature inasmuch as political behavior is, by definition, influence behavior. Generally speaking, the construct of "interest group behavior" is, by its very nature, suggestive of self-interest in political action. More specifically, however, the identification of incentives for self-interest can be found in the literature. (Clark and Wilson, 1961: Bernard, 1938).

Charles Lindblom has suggested that a more efficacious technique for purposeful intervention in the policy arena is the playing out of "partisan analysis"; that is, influence behavior is said to be more predictably effective when one policy maker identifies options which also serve the values of other policy makers to whom persuasion is directed. (Lindblom, 1968: 65, 95). In such conditions, the various policy goals of the parties involved are said not to be challenged.

In the interorganizational arena, it has often been noted that organizations act so as to protect, preserve or expand their domains, regardless of the service function assigned by the community or supra-system. (See Warren, 1971: Levine and White, 1961).

In studying power relationships in intraorganizational behavior, Etzioni has identified (among other types) an orientation toward organizational involvement on the part of members that is said to be "calculative". (Etzioni, 1961: 11-13). Such an orientation, said to be essentially an orientation of self-interest, was observed by Boettcher in his test of Etzioni's compliance theory in a welfare system (Boettcher, 1973).

More specifically, in terms of interracial group relations, self-interest incentives have been seen as a key dynamic in organizing political behavior. Carmichael and Hamilton, in exploring the viability of coalition-making, deal gingerly with the dangers involved in cooptation. Yet, they suggest that after first developing a strong

power base within the minority group, "all parties to the coalition must perceive a mutually beneficial goal based on the conception of each part of his own self-interest". (Carmichael and Hamilton, 1968: 77). In this same context, Norval Glenn has indicated that "self-interest is the most basic and important force underlying white policy and action vis a vis blacks". (cited in Burkey, 1971: 74).

Social Theory. Functional orientations in sociology, by virtue of their emphasis upon system requisites, perhaps run the risk of overlooking the more idiosyncratic incentives of social actors; that is, the focus is generally more upon system outcomes rather than incentives as inputs to social action in a system.

In one study of the incentives of local actors in social welfare planning and policy-making, a relationship was observed between the self-interest incentives of participants and the particular roles that some actors fulfilled in initiating social action. Initiators of community and region-wide planning activity in establishing mental health services were observed as being moved primarily by concrete, tangible or material incentives in which self- (i.e., personal, organizational or community) interests were to be served. (Flynn, 1973a).

William Ryan, in perhaps more caustic though no less accurate fashion, has called the latent functions of welfare liberalism into question. Ryan speaks of the function of "victim-blaming" in which the consequences of social problems are confusedly intercharged with the causes of social dysfunction. He states that liberal victim-blammers either change the poor man or "cool him out" so as to "reconcile [their] own self-interest" [with] the prompting of humanitarian impulses". (Ryan, 1972: 26). This, of course, is little more than a modern version of the ancient Pharaoh's maintenance of the "vissier" for performance of welfare functions or the medieval and later Christian perversion of "making oneself God's debtor". In either case, seemingly altruistic behavior serves the interest of the primary actor initiating the welfare relationship.

SELF-INTEREST AND SOCIAL WELFARE

The classical, common and pervasive view of social welfare's uniqueness among social institutions as a vehicle for unilateral exchange is no better illustrated than by Edmund A. Smith. Smith argues that social welfare as a social institution differs from other social institutions; that is, political, economic and religious/patriotic institutions are said to be expressions of collective

social concern for collectivities of populations. All individuals, in laying out and setting forth the laws, norms and labeling of social categories, are said to be collectively serving their own interests (e.g., "making America safe for democracy"; keeping "crime off the streets", etc.). Such a characterization is thought not to be true of social welfare institutions. Welfare institutions are, rather, thought to be the social expression of the collective concern for individual conditions (Smith, 1965: 17-23); for example, while the aged and/or permanently and totally disabled may rightfully lay claim to the privileges of dependence, the social relationship is assumed to be a unilateral exchange in that benefits accrue to the individual at the largesse of the collectivity. The only interest assumed to be served is for the needy individual, or, perhaps a hated dependent group. The self-interest of the collectivity as donor is generally not considered.

Assuming, again, that the welfare relationship should more accurately be cast as a bilateral or reciprocal exchange among actors, a reconceptualization of the exchange system is in order. This is to say that self-interest behavior on the part of actors is no different in the social welfare institutions. A case in point is provided by Gans in his enumeration of some fifteen functions of poverty (which, of course, at times gives rise to public assistance policies). Included among the functions of the poor and the phenomenon of poverty are the provision of a low-wage labor pool, the assurance of jobs for human service professionals, the maintenance of the status of the non-poor in the stratification system, and the contribution of the poor in stabilizing the political process, since the poor vote less and the political system is able to ignore them. (Gans, 1972). Hence, one might see here the bilateral or multilateral self-interests served for other than those generally assumed to be at the bottom and at the receiving end of social relationships.

A SELF-INTEREST MODEL

David Gil offers a useful model in developing a framework for social welfare policy analysis in the self-interest context. For purposes of this paper, only three aspects of that framework will be discussed here. The first aspect is Gil's position that the crucial dynamic for change is the education of the elite* to perception

*These actors are referred to as "elites" in Etzioni's sense of being those whose power subordinates the participation of others rather than in the context of a pyramidal power structure. Hence, those in positions of setting the parameters of policy are policy power elites, as with voters, public opinion makers and other, more typical conceptions of decision-makers.

of self-interest in policy change. The second aspect of the Gil model is the common domains of social policy. The third aspect is the mechanisms by which the domains of social policy are regulated. (Gil, 1970; 1973).

Perception of Self-Interest. The first major aspect of the Gil model, which essentially provides the nexus of this paper, is the contention that the source of energy for a value system in any society is the perception of self-interest; that is, the priority ranking of social values are reflective of the self-interests of its members. Assuming the validity of that point of view (and, indeed, the preceding discussion was devoted to surveying the literature for support from other sources), it is further contended that the major dynamic for policy change is the education of decision-making elites to newly perceived self-interests; that is to say that, if a public remains unchallenged or uninformed as to what its interests are, there is no chance for change in the institutionalized inequality of rights and statuses. However, if such publics can be educated to the recognition that many patterns and activities do not serve their (i.e., individual, group, organizational or community) interests, the potential for new and alternative, and possibly egalitarian, social policies is presented. In other words, such a conceptualization takes the reality of inequality and the hope of equality out of the arena of "zero-sum" games. Or, stated another way, equality is redefined as a distributable, rather than a fixed and finite, commodity.

The Domains of Social Policy. It is observed by Gil that there are three common domains over which social policy provides regulation. The first is the regulation of the over-all quality of life; the second is the regulation of the circumstances of living of individuals; the third is the regulation of the relationships of the society's members, in various groupings and in society as a whole. These three components of domain are, assumedly, never left to chance in any society. Their regulation is developed through laws, norms, customs and other patterned behavior.

Examples may be found in separatist and discriminatory public school systems, on the one hand, or in court-ordered desegregation plans, on the other; the nature of the domain may also be observed in the various behaviors of the Bureau of Indian Affairs in terms of how the rights of reservation Indians are variously exploited, protected or advocated.

The Mechanisms of Policy Alteration. In Gil's framework, the mechanisms by which the domains are altered or maintained are: 1) resource development, 2) status allocation, 3) rights distribution, and 4) the linkage between status and rights. Gil subsumes that which is generally referred to as economic policy under the more general rubric of social policy. In fact, the mechanisms of policy alteration, as they are played out, are said to often be determined by economic policies.

In the mechanism of resource development, a society's decisions regarding the development of its resources and its priorities are held to be the first means of regulation of domain. Social policies in this area may be seen as effecting the manner and extent to which life-sustaining and life-enhancing goods and services are developed and distributed. This mechanism is clearly illustrated in the federal government's interest being served by retaining water or mineral rights over Indian reservation lands. This fact was clearly noted by critics such as Senator Edward Kennedy regarding Wounded Knee in 1973 who obviously recognized the bilateral nature of the welfare exchange. (Wassaja, 1973). The residents need not to have been reminded, or course, as they were no doubt familiar with the problem.

Secondly, social policies are said to effect the manner and extent to which statuses are allocated vis a vis the social positions to which people are assigned. This second mechanism allocates individuals to positions and allocates the positions needing fulfillment to individuals. This process is manifested in manpower allocations, divisions of labor and the association of particular individuals and units with certain roles. This mechanism is manifest in the allocation of certain social categories to, say, migrant laborers, as with certain groups of southern blacks, southwest chicanos and Appalachian whites.

By the third mechanism (the distribution of rights) social policies are seen as the alteration of the legitimacy with which various actors in a social system may lay claim to the real and symbolic, and acquired and ascribed, rewards and entitlements. Examples of applications of the rights mechanism are found, explicitly, in the Civil Rights Act and minimum wage legislation; symbolic devices are found in alterations in labeling, as with "chairpersons", rather than "chairman", etc.

The fourth mechanism, the linkage between status and rights, is manifested in the manner and extent to which the rewards and entitlements become associated with particular statuses. That is, certain privileges and prerogatives become associated with particular roles and positions. An illustration of the linkage between status and right can be found, informally, in the practice of "if you're black, stay back". More formally, poll taxes and voter registration tests have patterned the claim to rewards and entitlements. Another example might be the right of the donor in welfare relationships to set the conditions of receipt (e.g., as with eligibility standards and moral codes of conduct). Another, yet obverse, example might be the right of beneficiaries in social insurance plans to lay claim to benefits, without question, once eligibility is established inasmuch as entitlement is established in advance (i.e., a universal characteristic of social insurance as opposed to public assistance).

In summary, social policy change may be defined as an alteration in any one or more of the four mechanisms. The maintenance of the current state of all four of the mechanisms is the retention of the status quo in social relationships. A change in any one provides opportunity for new levels of equality or inequality for individuals and social categories, groups, families, etc.

SELF-INTEREST AND EGALITARIANISM

Several inter-related propositions regarding self-interest as a dynamic in social welfare policy have been pursued, above. Support has been drawn from social science literature and a model for studying social welfare policies has been reviewed. The bilateral exchange in social welfare relationships has been discussed, the self-interest dynamic has been observed in theory and example and a model aimed at the education of decision-making elites to newly perceived self-interests has been considered. In the balance of this discussion we will demonstrate the application to present day problems and policies.

First, some consideration is given to two fundamental differences in the conceptualization of egalitarianism; next, some examples from school desegregation and black-ethnic group similarities in voting behavior are examined; lastly, some speculative and hypothetical applications of the self-interest propositions are applied to the present condition of the American Indian.

Corrective vs. Redemptive Egalitarianism. This paper is not aimed at providing a rationale for a utopian scheme. Rather, it is aimed at exploring a proposition that self-interest is a dynamic in social welfare policy formulation. The proposition is pursued here in the spirit of distributive justice and not in the spirit of a utopian leveling of differences. In a critique of Rawls' A Theory of Justice, (Rawls, 1971), Charles Frankel makes the distinction between the two orientations quite clear (Frankel, 1973). Frankel notes that there are vast differences between what he calls "corrective egalitarianism" and "redemptive egalitarianism". Redemptive egalitarianism is said to try to solve the age old problem of evil; a transcendent harmony is seen as the end of social activity in which the moral imperative is the leveling of differences among people; in rather deterministic fashion, redemptive egalitarianism is said to be aimed at restoring things to their "original design".

On the other hand, corrective egalitarianism is said to be primarily concerned with distributive justice. In more indeterminate fashion, corrective egalitarianism would permit idiosyncratic differences and individual initiative, but not without justice. Frankel contends that the real question is:

which equality are you for, and what kind of inequality are you willing to accept as its cost.
(Frankel, 1973: 57).

Frankel generates some interesting speculative questions. First, he notes that some say that women cannot have equality as long as marriage, home and family are perceived as primary roles. Yet, how does one satisfy the individual who precisely wants those things in life? Does she become, then, the psychologically and socially disadvantaged person who is the target of leveling social policies. Or, as a second example, are "opportunities to kill oneself with cigarettes...less important than opportunities to kill oneself with overwork?" (Frankel, 1973: 57). Should we keep one category going with rebuilt hearts or repeated surgery or expensive drugs, and, [meanwhile], let another category starve? (Frankel, 1973: 58).

Thinking in terms of the utility of educating the policy making elites to newly perceived self-interests, such questions, and such differences in the popular desideratum of which type of egalitarianism is desired, are crucial to which incentives are "salable" as new self-interests. The selection of newly perceived self-interests need not be seen as a baseline leveling but, rather, a choice among alternatives aimed at a more just egalitarianism.

The Incentives of School Desegregation. In a midwestern community involved in debate over the desirability of a public school racial desegregation plan then in effect, some examples of conscious and purposeful appeals to self-interest were observed. When local and state-wide organizations made efforts to persuade the public (i.e., community voting policy elites) of the disutility of school desegregation, a counter move was made by the prodesegregation groups. When it was clear that the state council of parent-teacher organizations was being pressured to endorse a resolution condemning "busing", the prodesegregation groups developed, distributed and interpreted materials clearly aimed at educating the policy makers to newly perceived self-interest while meeting in state conventions. For example, a one-page flyer was distributed, often in personal face-to-face contact, which made visible the benefits of the policy option (i.e., school desegregation). Benefits of the policy option of desegregation were identified, such as the fact that the particular school system had laid claim to over one-fourth of the total Emergency School Assistance Act funding allocated for the entire state in that particular year due to the community's instituting of the plan. The group made note of the opportunities to obtain specialized staff so as to provide individualized instruction and the realized opportunities in obtaining needed equipment. Perhaps the incentive appealing to the broadest range of self-interests was the noted reduction of violence and absence of school closings due to disturbances, which were inventoried and cataloged for the three years prior to the plan. The new awareness that, in the first year of the racial balance plan, no school had closed early and no child had to miss a day of school was exceedingly persuasive in its appeal to the self-interest of those deliberating on the proposed resolution, which was subsequently removed from agenda consideration.

Incentives of Black-Ethnic Voting Coalitions. It is commonly assumed that the political goals of ghetto blacks and clustered groups are non-distributable. In an analysis of voting data, Howard Palley concluded that:

in certain particular cases commonality of interests transcends ethnicity and seems to be related to class interests. If such perceived commonality can be combined with an issue emphasis that transcends class interest and emphasizes 'the common interest' in social development, a political strategy sufficient to bring about major social development will be achievable. (Palley, 1973: 252-3).

Noting that conflict among ethnic and class groups sharing common interests often contributes to their political impotency, Palley suggests that the perceived commonality offers the possibility of an intraclass and interclass coalition focused upon social development. While the potential requires further exploration, perhaps around selected promising issues, the data suggests that education to newly perceived self-interests is a useful dynamic in potential coalition.

Incentives for a new Indian policy. While native American Indians cannot accurately be referred to in the collective generality of a "new Indian policy", the sense here is that there may be egalitarian opportunities for a variety of reservation and off-reservation tribes and individual citizens to be obtained in identifying newly perceived self-interests for those who hold decision-making power.

For example, in seeing the federal government as a decision-making elite, the Department of the Interior recognized that it can no longer tolerate the embarrassment of not providing protection of Indian natural resources (e.g., oil and grazing lands) and in the unilateral exploitation of water rights. The Wassaja News has, ironically, pointed out that Indians fear termination of the special relationship they have with the federal government because this would mean an end to treaty obligations and "natives would be at the mercy of industrial and agricultural interests". (Wassaja, 1973b: 19). The newly perceived bilateral interests of Indians (i.e., resource control) and the federal government (i.e., image maintenance) may alter the posture of the Department of the Interior maintained since the federal takeover of Indian domains.

New contractual horizons between ranchers and industrial interests and various tribes cannot be dismissed lightly as utopian thoughts. While such possibilities would necessarily be approached with caution, we are reminded of the multilateral beneficiaries developed out of the cooperative activity of the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA). The original TVA area was a forty per cent black population (Duffus, 1944). Although the benefits accrued to that group are certainly questionable, they are not inconsequential. To be sure, multivariate interests were variously perceived and realized in TVA, such as the multiplication of paycheck income, increased quality in food production, removal of the threat of flooding, business

income increases, less dependence upon government for residual care, etc. (Lilienthal, 1953). A review of history could be more than an intellectual exercise in search of new policy options. The potential here for multilateral self-interests to be served in "Indian nations" should not be ignored.

IMPLICATIONS

Contrary to common belief, social welfare policies aimed at the management of social problems can be seen as bilateral or multilateral transfers of wealth or privilege from one population category to another. Such policies are not only provided out of the largesse of dominant groups. Such policies alter the domains of life conditions which manipulate the patterning of statuses and rights among classes and categories of people and are far more than altruistic expressions of collective concerns for needy individuals.

A major conclusion offered by this review is that newly perceived self-interests, as they become possible and observable by dominant decision-making elites, is a potential dynamic for more egalitarian social welfare policy choices and outcomes. Preoccupation with altruistic explanations for social welfare programs, or continued reliance upon moral exhortation, have done little to alter the patterning of the relationship between social problems and social welfare policy. Perhaps we have made so little progress toward developing an integrated problem/policy theory since we have begun and continued with false propositions regarding altruistic incentives and strategies of moral exhortation. The self-interest construct may offer a useful reformulation of possible opportunities for egalitarianism in distributive justice in majority-minority inter-relations.

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