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Researching Disability Employment Policies

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INTRODUCTION

Research is a multifaceted enterprise. Inquiry includes conducting surveys, using secondary data sets, as well as a range of more qualitative explorations. Positivist and interpretivist paradigms compete over the status of knowledge, the possibility of attaining objective knowledge, the role of the researcher in the research process, and the place of values and politics in research (Hughes, 1990; Blaikie, 1993; May, 1993).

What place does policy analysis occupy in these methodologies and methods? We draw on our experiences of one approach to policy analysis - a desk-based review of documentary material from 15 countries. The review was about national policies to promote employment of disabled people and, as such, was an example of 'disability research'. The commissioners of the research required us to report from the perspective of national governments, however, and not from the point of view of other actors in the policy process, such as disabled people's organisations. As effectiveness of policy was framed in terms of meeting 'national objectives' other, competing, objectives could not be addressed. We explore these and other constraints encountered in doing disability research in the policy arena. We address a series of interrelated questions: what was the background to the research; how was the study undertaken; what were the weaknesses in carrying it out; what were the outcomes of the project; and what impact did it have?

BACKGROUND

In 1992 the UK Department of Employment¹ commissioned the Social Policy Research Unit at the University of York to undertake a desk-top review in the field of disability and employment. The study aimed to 'provide an overview of legislation, schemes and services aimed at

¹ Now the Department of Education and Employment

integrating disabled people into the workforce in all EC member states and also the United States, Canada, Australia and Sweden'. The UK was not included. The review sought to outline the types of provision in place within each country, look in greater detail at the implementation of different legislative and administrative approaches, and discuss their effectiveness in achieving the objectives within the national framework. The research specification anticipated that to attain an up-to-date picture of measures it would be necessary to study legal and research documents, often using non- English sources.

The study was commissioned in late 1992 and carried out over four months, with a further month devoted to writing and preparing the final document for publication. The report was published by the Employment Department in its Research Series in October 1993 (Lunt and Thornton, 1993).

This brief description of the commissioning, conceptualisation and conduct of the research can cover only some of the more significant nuances of the negotiation and research process: how the research contract was agreed; what decisions were taken in doing the research; and what constraints and difficulties arose.

The way in which the study was commissioned introduced an important 'stakeholder' into the picture and ensured the research was applied (aimed at addressing particular policy issues) rather than pure (aimed at furthering theory and knowledge for its own sake) (Rossi and Freeman, 1993). The relationship between research funder (in this case a government department) and the researchers undertaking the study is central to understanding the conduct and outcomes of the research. Cantley (1992), in a discussion of relationships between contractors and researchers, identifies important factors that shape research negotiations between contractor and contracted: dominant paradigms and assumptions about the role of the researcher, academic context, assumptions about the use of the research, agency context, and funding arrangements. In this chapter we describe the ways in which our enquiry was shaped by factors such as these in the contractor-researcher relationship.

DOMINANT PARADIGMS AND ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT THE ROLE OF THE RESEARCHER

The impetus to undertake the review came wholly from the commissioning Department who negotiated with the contracted Unit.

Here we enter the twilight world of contract research, where topics are rarely the choice of the researchers, and where work is commissioned to assist with policy development or service delivery (Richardson et al, 1990).

Why was the Social Policy Research Unit asked to undertake this particular study? The explanation probably lies with the Unit's 20 year track record in carrying out research studies for Government Departments, including Departments of Health, Employment and Social Security. It could be assumed that the Unit was sensitive to policy-makers' needs, and understood the conventions in researching, interpreting and presenting material. To draw on an analogy from the policy-making relationship between interest groups and government departments, the Unit was an 'insider group' in its dealings with central government (Jordan and Richardson, 1987). As Fletcher comments, 'bodies such as the Employment Service are often risk-averse when it comes to appointing researchers' (Fletcher, 1997, p.179). For commissioners, standards and reliability may take priority over requirements that researchers have previously carried out disability research, are sensitive to disabled people, or are themselves disabled people. That said, the Unit was not unfamiliar with the political context and sensitivity of disability research (Baldwin and Parker, 1992).

It might have been reasonably assumed that the researchers were unlikely to raise troublesome issues and upset established power relations. As Lukes (1974) recognises, power is not only about the way decisions are taken, or issues kept off the agenda, but also about manipulation of interests and exercise of pervasive control. Some might argue that the Unit would perform to the required standards and forgo power and influence. On the contrary, we argue that the commissioner-contractor relationship does allow space for researchers to influence the shape, process and outcomes.

Why were the authors chosen to carry out the research? Perhaps choice is too strong a word - the research needed to be done immediately and we were available. The Unit had researched aspects of the employment situation of disabled people in the UK but the international dimension was quite new. As the researchers engaged to carry out the review, our awareness of the policy issues and debates was limited. We had no track record of comparative research. Labour market policy was a new field, as was employment law and the gamut of specialist legislation for disabled people; anti-discrimination legislation, employment quotas, and

mainstreaming were relatively unfamiliar concepts. Our initial ignorance had some advantages. We were not encumbered with pre-conceptions or conventional analytical frameworks. We were open to new ideas and perspectives. One person's openness is another's idea of emptiness, however. How were we to know whether what we had to say was of interest, or had already been said?

The dominant assumption is that experienced researchers have technical skills and abilities that can be applied to new areas of enquiry and that a working knowledge of context is not a necessity. This paradigm sees research as a 'technical' process involving the systematic application of methods and techniques, rather than an exercise embedded in a social and political context (Gouldner, 1976). The underlying paradigm of the research study was that researchers can be dispassionate, removed and aloof. It highlights key differences between traditional (positivistic) scientific approaches to social research, and more interpretivist and critical understandings (Hughes, 1990).

ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT THE USE OF RESEARCH

The study was meant to meet current policy needs and provide a 'source book' for further Employment Department work on disability employment policies and services. At the time, employment of disabled people was rising on the policy agenda internationally. In the UK, campaigns were under way for anti-discrimination legislation to mirror the USA Americans with Disabilities Act. Disability activists suspected that the Government intended to abandon the quota system dating from 1944, which imposed obligations on larger employers to employ disabled people but remained unenforced and ineffectual in securing working opportunities for disabled people. UK policy trends indicated that the collective obligation to employ disabled people might be supplanted by promotion of individual responsibility.

Against this background, we pondered on how far the review would be used as evidence or ammunition in UK debates on new policy directions. Here important questions arise about the use to which research findings are put, and the control researchers have over dissemination and interpretation (Rule, 1978; Richardson et al, 1990).

AGENCY CONTEXT

It would be naive to believe that policy-makers know in advance precisely what it is they wish to find out. The nature of the research task remains fluid, and precise issues and questions unfold as the investigation develops. Within broad parameters, researchers are able to exert a measure of influence on the shape and direction of the research project. Greater awareness and 'expertise' within an area increase bargaining strength. In the case of the disability and employment review, no one knew in advance what might emerge from such an exploratory study. Our preliminary investigation of the availability of information sources permitted us to formulate less ambitious aims.

Nor should it be assumed that commissioners are of a single mind. This project was jointly commissioned by the Department of Employment and its agency, Employment Services. The former was the lead partner in shaping the research specification, and more practically, meetings were held in London rather than Sheffield! Their requirements differed: the Employment Department wanted the study to report on policy and effectiveness; and Employment Services sought information to assist service delivery. Because of time constraints and the limitations of a desk-top study which could not adequately reflect what happens on the ground, we had more freedom to pursue policy dimensions rather than service delivery.

FUNDING ARRANGEMENTS: AROUND THE WORLD IN 80 DAYS

It could be argued that limited time devoted to the study prevented adequate investigation and analysis of the issues. We had to go around the world in 80 (working) days! We had to contend with one criticism that the researchers were pawns of an Employment Department paying lip-service to the idea of an international review through intentional under-resourcing. In fact, in terms of the Employment Department's research budgets, this was a relatively large piece of research and an essential condition was that it be completed before the start of the new financial year.

METHODS

The study drew on a range of sources including legislative texts, published documents, conference papers, working papers and assorted grey material. As May (1993) comments on the use of documentary methods, the sources utilised depend on the researcher's perspective, and the time and resources available. We drew on documents provided by

international bodies such as the International Labour Organisation, European Commission, Council of Europe, and United Nations. Among them we found reviews of specific areas of our enquiry, such as legislation and sheltered employment, although not all were up to date or comprehensive. Other sources drawn upon included literature produced by pan-national disability organisations, such as the World Deaf Association and World Blind Association. At the national level we sought, often with difficulty, to include work of disability organisations and voluntary groups. We obtained general literature through database searches and abstracting services.

Documents produced by government authorities are the largest class of documents available to the social researcher (Scott, 1990). National sources included the various government departments with responsibility for some aspect of disability and employment, including departments of labour, welfare, health, and social security. Initially it was not always clear which departments to approach; some countries turned out to place responsibility for disability policy, including work and income, with health departments. Responsibility for policy and services typically was scattered across a number of departments and was not necessarily coordinated. Consequently, we did not know in advance who held useful information, and neither did departments know what was held elsewhere.

We also approached organisations responsible for monitoring and enforcing parts of legislation, as well as statutory and non-statutory service providers. Finally, we sought the assistance of individuals identified as being knowledgeable and well placed to describe developments in particular countries. In all cases, we asked for details of national legislation relating to the employment of disabled people, details of schemes and services which aim to implement the legislation and any official reports of the effectiveness of policy.

We pieced together fragments to gain a picture of the provision in each country. The view of disability employment policy was on the whole unidimensional. For example, there was a shortage of material on the disability-benefits interface, except in The Netherlands where responsibility lay with a single department. Little information was offered on housing, transport and education policies. Consequently, we were steered towards a narrow depiction of what constitutes disability employment policy. The logic of our information gathering meant that we tended to report on specialist and priority provision, and not on how disabled people were served by mainstream services. These deficits

provoked us to consider how specialist and mainstream provision are inter-related. We were aware that work must be situated in a wider context than just employment policy.

PROBLEMS

Various problems and dilemmas arose during the study. In some study countries we obtained few published accounts of policy developments and their effects but personal communications provided potentially useful perspectives, frequently from disability organisations. We were constrained, however, by requiring referenceable sources, and faced difficulties in reporting the judgements and opinions of any national sources unless they were written down in a referenceable form. Consequently, as with most desk-top studies, we privileged the official accounts and focused upon policy intentions.

The problems of drawing on secondary sources were exacerbated by our limited understanding of the national context, the assumptions employed (including definitions and researchers' stance) and the language. These are discussed below.

The intention to review the effectiveness of various measures and their relationship to official objectives was difficult to achieve in practice. The first problem is the identification of policy objectives. Only when the legislation is recent and there is a distinct break with tradition are policy aims likely to be clearly stated. More often they develop incrementally. Official accounts of policy tend to be reproduced without much revision and we found ourselves describing official policy that locally based experts had difficulties in recognising!

Low importance was attached to evaluations. A major problem was how to access any evaluations of the impact of policy measures, and how to assess the relative significance of studies we did locate. It is one thing to put a policy in place, another for it to be effective. Reviewing the literature involves trying to match official and non-official accounts. Certain discussions of effectiveness and evaluation were more easily reported than others. There tended to be an emphasis on quantitative approaches, and on levels of spending on services. But a high number of people receiving services or placement does not mean there are high levels of consumer satisfaction or appropriate jobs. Further, the study emphasis was on access to employment, to the neglect of advancement of disabled people within employment.

A further constraint was that we looked at objectives of national policies and their effectiveness, and discounted initiatives that were not considered as national policy. Thus, we could not take account of what other social partners were doing. For example, employers' organisations sometimes undertook initiatives independently of national policy and legislative measures. Similarly, we could take no account of voluntary initiatives around supported employment and employment advice and counselling services. We were in danger, therefore, of getting only a partial picture of national provision. Fragmentation and privatisation of service provision were increasingly evident during the 1990s, and thus crucial to the overall description. However, our assessments were entirely 'top-down' and could not take account of the influence of grass-roots movements, including how disability organisations contributed to policy formulation.

Language was a problem. As we knew only French and a little German we needed to rely mostly on English language sources. This reinforced our reliance on official accounts and limited access to material produced by disability organisations in the other languages. May (1993) has commented on the difficulty of understanding cultures different from our own. More particularly, he notes how difficulties of translation lead to a reliance on official publications, giving rise to the problem that:

'Any analysis based upon such documents may then produce partial and incomplete theories. In other words, the stereotype of English visitors abroad continuing to speak English, and simply raising their voices if not understood by "those foreigners", has its research equivalent' (May, 1993: 162).

Comparative research has inevitable problems and this desk-top study was no exception. As Hill (1996) notes, one of the main motives for comparative studies is the desire to 'learn' from the experience of other countries. Thus, comparative research tends to be research of a certain type; descriptive with an emphasis on quantitative aspects, often removed from the national context. It places emphasis on describing spending and institutional arrangements and less on the comparison of outcomes and achievements.

Further dangers in comparative research include UK-centred interpretation and lack of awareness of the ingrainedness of other national approaches. Initially it is not easy to understand that Denmark

does not recognise disabled people as a distinct group, nor to comprehend the pervasive system in France of assessing degrees of 'disability' and classifying people accordingly. Such differences cannot be understood without looking at the historical forces behind them. Comparative research needs to understand traditional approaches to grasp the significance of, for example, associations of disabled people in the policy process. Problems understanding terms and definitions were compounded by the language problem: just what is meant by 'disabled people's organisations'?

REVISITING

From the 1993 review we became aware that disability and employment was commonly an issue neglected by a range of stakeholders (and potential stakeholders), including those with policy responsibilities within various departments, organisations of disabled people, academics and others with an interest in labour market issues. Moreover, this neglect was not peculiar to anyone country, but was a recurring theme across the majority of the study countries.

Since the early 1990s, interest in issues of disability and work has been growing. The disability movement and calls for choice and empowerment began to place more emphasis on employment, particularly through the campaigns around the introduction of anti-discrimination legislation. Pressure on social security spending on long-term sickness and invalidity benefits began to lead to more active disability employment policies.

We decided to revisit the study in 1996. Feedback from various stakeholders suggested that the study had been useful. It brought together material previously dispersed across a number of countries, and prevented constant 'reinvention of the wheel'. We were told that the material was particularly relevant to countries developing disability employment policies and seeking guidance on competing ways forward, who were, for example, weighing up quota systems and discrimination legislation. The readership ranged from developing countries and economies in transition looking to develop new policies to countries with more established policies and traditions looking afresh at disability employment strategies. To obtain a national picture appeared a useful starting point. As May (1993) notes:

'One aim of comparative research, therefore, is to understand and explain the ways in which societies and cultures

experience and act upon social, economic and political changes' (pp. 153-4).

Notions of anti-discrimination legislation and supported employment attracted particular attention. The interest in the international situation was not confined to government departments but also concerned organisations trying to influence discussions and debates.

For our own part, we were conscious that the policy picture was rapidly changing. Indeed our account of 1993 was quickly becoming outdated as new policy initiatives were being introduced. We wanted to report on these changes but also to take a closer look at the effectiveness of policy measures. There were inevitable gaps in the 1993 account that we sought to improve on.

Our approach and emphasis differed when revisiting the review in 1996. For a number of the countries we used national informants, who were grounded in the national context, to gather material and assemble the account. These individuals had critical perspectives on policy changes. We sought to place more emphasis on non-official accounts, and also understand the place of disabled people's, employees' and employers' organisations in influencing policy. There were particular issues and linkages that we sought to improve on, particularly the area of social security, which we recognised as intrinsic to any debate around work. We sought to extend coverage to an expanded European Union that now included Austria, Finland and Sweden.

We also included the UK in 1996. The funding in 1996 was provided by a grant from the European Commission, with additional support from the International Labour Organisation, rather than by any national government department.

OUTCOMES AND DISSEMINATION

Policy research of whatever type should be disseminated. As Richardson et al (1990) recommend, dissemination of research findings should be to the widest possible audiences, including attention to trade and voluntary publications, summaries and conference papers. The study was published as a full (208 page) report and a four page executive summary. Both were available free and distributed generously by the Employment Department. Over 100 copies were distributed to country sources, as an acknowledgement of their contribution. A descriptive article in a trade

journal and two seminars to Employment Department staff followed publication. Outside the UK the report was widely distributed in paper form and accessible on the World Wide Web as part of the GLADNET international database of texts in the field of employment and training of disabled people.

We were keen to increase awareness of the study because we had come to realise that such a comprehensive compilation filled a gap, at least for English language readers. We were anxious that others should be freed from having to undertake a similar, now superfluous, task. But at the time we were uncertain about the use of such a piece of work. The material might help people to contribute to discussions around policy development, although such an effect clearly depends on the policy-making process and how we believe decisions are shaped in the policy arena. We were acutely aware of the lack of evidence on the effectiveness of some much vaunted policies and the problems of transferability of policy.

Subsequently, most of our dissemination effort was directed more at spreading the ideas which we had begun to develop in doing the work than at raising awareness of the 'facts' of national policies and services. We sought to stimulate debate around the disability and employment issues, encouraging policy makers and stakeholders to think about the whole and the parts of disability employment policy. We had identified important trends, issues and questions which we felt deserved further attention: were anti-discrimination and quota-type measures incompatible; how was service delivery likely to develop; how would newly recognised groups of disabled people alter the policy agenda? A further strand was to consider how employment fitted with the theoretical moves that have taken place around disability and to explore policy from competing sociological viewpoints (Lunt and Thornton, 1994). The study also prompted us to think more about the importance of the social security interface with employment, which we explored in a commission from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (Lunt and Thornton, 1996).

At the most practical level the study's impact on UK national policy was at best indirect. The publication was used as a 'source-book' within the Employment Department when considering policy options. We did attempt, however, to build on the experience and knowledge we had acquired and offered a commentary on the changes under way in the UK (Thornton and Lunt, 1995).

NON-DISABLED RESEARCHERS DOING DISABILITY POLICY RESEARCH?

Given the sustained critique of non-disabled persons setting research agendas for, and doing research on, disabled people (Disability, Handicap & Society, 1992), how acceptable to the UK disability establishment is policy research undertaken by non-disabled researchers? Two points are worth raising in relation to our work. First, we were not trying to interpret the experiences of disabled people. Nevertheless, one critique of interpretative methods may still be levelled against policy research; namely, that researchers render faithful accounts (albeit in our case 'policy accounts') and then move on to other issues, while disabled subjects (and issues) remain unchanged (Oliver, 1992). Such criticism would contend that as contract researchers undertaking short pieces of work, we raze the ground before moving on to more fertile grazing (or Foucauldian 'gazing') pastures. This is a strong critique, independent of the research methods used. Such practices are encouraged by the very nature of contract research and the paradigm of transferable skills. However, we have both identified disability and employment as a crucial policy issue and also maintained a professional interest. We believe it important that the issue gets the policy attention it deserves and continues to be debated. On the other hand, developing an ongoing policy interest in this area may itself be as controversial as the charge of 'transience'. Clearly, however, any study must compete in the marketplace of ideas, where differing stakeholders will attach more or less value to the product that results.

The second, related, point concerns whether policy analysis of this nature has any value: does research facilitate change and make a difference? The relationship between research, policy development and social change is thorny, and encompasses ground which we cannot cover here. A distinction made by Bury (1996) is that research may not deserve the thrust of criticism reserved for it and that we should focus on political inactivity. He makes strong arguments for separating the two.

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter is a *post hoc* rationalisation of a research study. Looking back, we have identified the constraints encountered in doing disability research, including how the study was undertaken, the outcomes of the project, and the impact it had. Rarely is such detailed attention given to potential constraints in advance of a study; indeed, ongoing negotiation

and problem - solving are the norm. Reflection, however, can be useful in helping identify what was difficult or problematic about the process. Reflection, although not changing the relations of research production has the capacity to illuminate. Government Departments are slowly adjusting to a new understanding of what disability is and the implications for disability research and policy. Non-disabled researchers have a responsibility to engage in the wider debate, and, whenever possible, act as a catalyst in their dealings with central agencies.

Two questions remain: could the study have been done differently, and could it have been done better? As with any research project, the answers are inevitably 'yes'. For example, we have talked about disability as a homogeneous category, but clearly it is not. Variables of gender and race are missing from the review and subsequent update, and age is only partially addressed. 'National policy' was assumed to be synonymous with governments' interests and disabled people's role in its formulation is inadequately reflected. There is too little attention to job retention and career advancement, reflecting the policy interest in (re)entry to employment. Many essential aspects of the employment infrastructure are missing: education, transport, housing, health and social services. The focus is on special and priority policies and services for disabled people, ignoring the fact that disabled people are consumers of services which are open to all.

This does not mean that there was no value in undertaking the study. The issue of disability and employment is key and must be brought to the policy arena and gradually exposed to scrutiny and debate. A variety of interests and strategies can ensure this happens and that discussion remains high on the agenda. We would hope to contribute, if only in small part, to this process. In employment and disability policy there clearly remains work still to do.

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