Coping and Pulling Through
Action Processes in Vulnerable Situations

Edited by

VIVIANNE CHÂTEL
University Paris V-La Sorbonne, France and
University of Fribourg, Switzerland

MARC-HENRY SOULET
University of Fribourg, Switzerland

Translation by Margaret Lainsbury
revised by John Richardson

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Chapter 9

Social Action and Domination

Franz Schultheis

Even though the issue of domination in the social relationship to vulnerability has been raised many times in theoretical approaches and historical analyses of social politics, it has rarely been the object of systematic empirical analyses. The little input that has taken place has mostly been inspired by interactionism or phenomenology, and the notion itself of domination too often remains locked into the idea of methodological individualism. Two individuals are brought together—a vulnerable person and someone who is supposed to help—in a situation of direct communication and negotiation, whilst the institutional setting, the political and ideological issues of the measures deployed, the specific strategies, social and cultural characteristics of those seeking help, are widely disregarded, though they all play a part in the production of the effects of the social action.

This chapter will try to provide some theoretical reflections on the theme proposed by this book, with a sort of thematic highlighting of a piece of research centering on the German social security system’s taking charge of poor, vulnerable people at risk (Schultheis, 1999). This research was of a plurimethodological nature and included, among other things, ethnographic fieldwork over a period of several months in the form of practical work experience in a Social Security Office in a town in southern Germany. This enabled us to follow closely all sorts of exchanges—linguistic, material, symbolic—between those seeking help and the professional actors of the office.

The Catch-All Character of the Categories of Social Law

What was striking from the first day was the miscellaneous nature of the forms taken by what we here call vulnerability: stepping behind a counter-window in such an institution enables you to see, in just one morning, a procession of subjects, or clients with such varying circumstances and life courses, for whom suffering and misery take such different forms and, above all, have such different causes, that the only common denominator appears to be the fact that they find themselves in a juridical-administrative definition of being on the poverty line. Everyone sitting on the waiting room benches has come to claim the help due to those whose disposable income is situated below this poverty line—the cause, the origins, etc. of this situation are only of indirect interest. Hence, we are confronted with a non-causal
and non-categorical conception of poverty, or of vulnerability, with a catch-all logic. The sociological observer, who shares this social universe by standing behind the counter of an institution such as this, comes face to face with an extremely differentiated population. In a single morning, we saw a long-term unemployed person, a physically handicapped person in her wheelchair, a father who was the head of a large family and whose salary was insufficient to support the family, an elderly lady with an inadequate pension, a young person with psychiatric problems who had just been discharged from a psychiatric hospital, a young girl of 18 wanting to leave the family home and set up on her own, without having the necessary resources, a businessman who had gone bankrupt, a young doctoral student without a grant, who came to ask for help with her upkeep to be able to finish her thesis, a young drug addict, a young woman, head of a single-parent household with her baby in her arms, and finally, a homeless person who came to get his daily allowance of 15 marks.

In short, each person had an individual destiny and a personal biography which was apparently irreducible, unique and incomparable to others and, despite everything, they all shared a common fate: a lack of financial resources, economic insecurity, an absence of adequate individual resources, or primary solidarity to be able to deal with their fragile situation, and they had all resorted to social security, with all of the stigma and symbolic sufferings involved in such a step.

Amongst this population, gathered together in a single juridical-bureaucratic, catch-all category, we came across a group of people who seemed particularly interesting, given that they were the target of a global, not to say total, social care programme. They were pregnant women in a ‘conflict of pregnancy’ situation, whose specific vulnerability seemed to be of very particular interest to the political decision-makers.

A Special Programme to Combat a Particular Form of Vulnerability

The model called ‘Mother and Child’ was set up in 1975, following the conclusions of a piece of research carried out by a group of scientific experts consisting of psychologists, ethnologists, educationalists and paediatricians. These experts were charged with the scientific supervision of a sociopolitical experiment in Waldshut, a small town in the south of Germany.

A report, written by one of its proponents on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the creation of this allowance, stresses the ‘scientific’ character of this sociopolitical measure and praises a ‘philanthropic’ couple who greatly contributed to the success of the model – Mr Hasenstein, a paediatrician from Freiburg, and his wife. According to this report, Mr and Mrs Hasenstein had not only supplied the basic theoretical model of this original measure, but had also supervised its implementation.

Having had access to this report, these comments aroused our curiosity and, after a bibliographic search, we found a publication by the two main authors of the ‘Programm Mutter und Kind’ which bore the title What Children Are Owed. This work proved to be very significant, as it explained the philosophy and the logic of a new type of political control of family life. On the basis of the dyad ‘mother and child’ as an ‘irreplaceable anthropological constant’, the two authors explain that the delegation of the maternal functions to a third party, even if this means the child’s grandmother, must be avoided at all costs. Even the mother’s part-time absence can result in ‘psychological deprivation’ for the child and have disastrous consequences (juvenile delinquency, delays in psychological development, etc.). Which is why they present their ‘mother and child’ model as a sociopolitical approach, all the more operative to avoid such risks because it addresses a family type which is ‘deficient’ and ‘incomplete’, leading to a special kind of socioeducational supervision.

Thus, from the beginning, this programme was conceived as an institutional measure capable of, at least partially, restoring the classic family order endangered by the advent of women wage earners, and the drift towards a socialisation of the work of reproduction, judged ‘disastrous’ by the two authors. The model implemented thus made a public guarantee of a minimum income for pregnant women agreeing to participate in this experimentation for a period of three years after the birth of their child. Moreover, they would have to devote themselves uniquely to their educational tasks and give up any employment they may have had outside the home.

The absence of any concern with the return of the beneficiaries to the world of work is characteristic of the sociopolitical practice, and the ideological finality of the ‘programme’. Furthermore, it included socioeducational measures, aiming to promote the ‘best possible’ educational practice of the participants, thanks to systematic supervision by midwives, paediatricians, social workers and psychologists. Participation in this educational programme was obligatory and aimed, as its scientific promoters stressed, to avert the negative social effects of the deficient educational competence, characteristic of single mothers. The model ‘Mutter und Kind’, created at the very same time as the liberalisation of abortion in the Federal Republic of Germany, also explicitly aimed to motivate ‘lone’ pregnant women to choose the child, and to abandon the idea of an abortion thanks to the possibility of being taken care of financially for a period of three years.

Here, we are faced with a very special form of state intervention in family affairs: the welfare state offers a guaranteed family income to pregnant women deciding against a termination of pregnancy, and declaring themselves ready to limit themselves exclusively and continually to work within the family.

Thus, the sociopolitical care programme implemented in the Land of Baden-Württemberg made provision for state benefits to be paid over a period of three years to mothers-to-be who decided against an abortion, on condition that they live alone, or more precisely, without a spouse, that they give up any professional activity they may have had, and that they also agree to participate in a sociopsychological care programme. Through a sociohistorical reconstruction of how this was implemented, by analysing oral sources (informants) and written
sources (political and administrative documents), we saw that the promoters of this sociopolitical action model seemed to be thinking of, and planning for, a form of multi-dimensional vulnerability, functioning rather like a kaleidoscope: each turn gave another configuration, another definition of the social problem being targeted.

At one point those who invented the measure seemed to be concerned with the potential termination of pregnancy under the social class (distress), and thus the vulnerability of the foetus; at another it was the sociopsychological fragility of the women, as mothers-to-be in a conflict of pregnancy situation; at another it was the material insecurity of the future single-parent family (no male breadwinner) that seemed to be the focus of the social issue or, at yet another it was a matter of worrying about the vulnerability of the child to be born into a single-parent family, a family-type openly shown to be deficient by the scientific promoters of the programme.

The Social Invention of a Particular Model to Combat a Particular Form of Vulnerability

The model was drawn up by a group of psychologists, psychoanalysts, educationists and social workers, mandated by the government of the Land of Baden-Württemberg, and it claimed to offer systematic and scientifically-based care for the forms of vulnerability outlined above. This makes the measure particularly interesting for a critical analysis of the construction process for a particular social problem. According to our hypothesis, social intervention in a situation of vulnerability, which omits, not to say suppresses, the issue of domination with a well-meaning, but stereotyped conception of the clientele targeted, gives rise to a whole series of unplanned, unwanted and uncontrolled effects. These unplanned effects result from the juxtaposition in the programme of the imposition of a way of being in a sort of supervisory hothouse (comfortable form of social domination as regards material living conditions, but burdensome as regards the day-to-day life of the women obliged to agree to remain 'alone', and with a considerable effect on their life projects and biographies) on the one hand, and on the other, the strategies of the clients who, as we were able to see, often very actively contributed to the production and reinforcement of the effects of the domination that they were then subjected to, apparently in a purely passive way.

We are thus looking, not at the psychology, but at the sociology of 'victims', and the idea dear to Max Weber and Pierre Bourdieu, according to which people who are dominated contribute to their own domination by their acceptance of a dominant vision of the social world.
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The Presuppositions and Unconsidered Aspects of the Sociopolitical Programme Aimed for

Looking at the social consequences of this sociopolitical programme, it must be remembered that they are not simply the result of a sort of dysfunctions of a measure which just needs a better ‘running in’ period and a few adaptations. On the contrary, they seem to be a part of the presuppositions and preconstructions which are at the root of this type of social action in the face of vulnerability. Amongst these presuppositions, it is possible to pick out:

- The erroneous idea of the isolation of vulnerable women created by the meeting at the social security office window. As a paradigmatic configuration of an individualising vision of vulnerability, the encounter at the window runs the risk of losing sight of the forms of domination ‘before protection’, in relation to which public assistance can constitute a resource for liberating action. Many of the women questioned admitted to us that they had seen the programme as an unsuspected opportunity to escape, to free themselves from a suffocating marital life. It is these forms of masculine domination, endured by these women at their moment of greatest vulnerability, which pushed them into the arms of the promoters of the programme analysed.

- The illusion of purely passive entitlement, very frequent in social politics in general, and in social action dealing with vulnerability in particular, seems to have made a not inconsiderable contribution to the unleashing of the strategies deployed by the future clients of the programme who, depending on their circumstances and social profile, seemed to see very different opportunities in the offer they were made, and tried to use these opportunities to best advantage their respective future projects, even though the latter would too often prove to be illusory.

- Together with the two preceding presuppositions, a falsely coherent and unitary idea of the social profile of the clients contributed, as we were able to see, to the unawareness of the very strategic use made of the measures. Instead of representing a coherent social category, as the very idea of vulnerability and insecurity seems to suggest, the clientele we met showed great sociostructural differences and, depending on their social profile, a beneficiary of the programme could develop very particular strategies, and thus contribute to the production of effects which were difficult to foresee.

- Finally, we saw that different forms of omission, characteristic of the social action model analysed, were accompanied by a quasi-mechanical conception of the results to be produced by the sociopolitical intervention implemented. The contents of the official reports produced by the promoters of the programme made it clear that they were in a state of almost total ignorance, or misappraisal of the day-to-day life of the women supervised by their model, and of which they vaunted the benefits, leaving aside all of the contradictions, sufferings and harmful effects that we encountered in the stories of the women to whom we spoke.

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In short, it seems that this is a specific example of the recurrence of the social risks that this type of care engenders. The strategies of the women in the face of this measure differed according to their social profile. Whilst the women from the more modest environments saw the measure as a substantial material help, those who been employed in a skilled job seemed to see it more as a good opportunity to obtain a prolonged maternity leave, and as an easier way of realising their family project. But it is in the women with university diplomas that the most important biographical changes can be observed. All of them claimed to have lived with a spouse until their entry into the programme, and that this relationship had been unsatisfactory, even intolerable. These women had perceived the ‘programme’ as an escape route, enabling them to ‘make a fresh start’, despite the risk of finding themselves in a situation of long-term dependence on social services. Though Émile Durkheim (1975) was certainly right when he declared in his lecture on ‘La famille conjugale’ that the state was going to become a factor with an ever more direct role to play in domestic life, he was only thinking of the constitutional state, which by a whole series of changes to family rights has, in effect, helped to radically transform family relationships by removing the institutional bases of the patriarchal and authoritarian family model, and by granting all family members the status of autonomous holders of rights. He could not have foreseen to what extent the modern state, in its more and more accomplished form of welfare state, would play such a role a century later. Though, for the most part, the two forms of state intervention in family affairs take the form of greater equality and a reduction of masculine and paternal domination, they can, as we have tried to show, be paid for at the price of the establishment of new forms of dependence and domination.

References

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