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Telling Tales: Living the Effects of Public Policy

By Sheila Neysmith, Kate Bezanson, and Anne O'Connell
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Sheila Neysmith, Kate Bezanson, and Anne O'Connell have accomplished two rather remarkable goals in their book *Telling Tales, Living the Effects of Public Policy*. Feminist social research is, these days, full of an ethos about "giving voice" to those being researched. A laudable and long overdue goal, this commitment invites and implores researchers to let people speak for themselves. Implied in this is that the researcher lessens his or her control: the researcher's voice is moderated by providing more in-depth narrative directly from those being researched. This telling of 'stories' or in the title of this book, *Telling Tales* honors and respects the research subjects' abilities to describe their own situations their own ways.

While many endeavors that seek to tell stories and "give voice" do this well, a detailed policy analysis often suffers as the stories are left to 'speak' for themselves. *Telling Tales'* second and significant area of achievement is an effective modeling of both good methodological process while maintaining a strong policy analysis tradition. Enabling learning, at least in our pedantic western tradition, grounded as it is in modernity, requires both story and interpretation of its meaning. Thus, the dilemma of the post-modern or even modestly modern, researcher: how to both let the story speak for itself, without imposing or over-ascribing meaning, while also offering a strong analytic voice? Overcoming this challenge, Neysmith et al. offer an analysis of public policy and public policy change in Canada that is thorough, thoughtful, and sufficiently complex. The breadth of the policy discussion from welfare to employment provisions to health care makes this critical reading for those seeking to understand the cumulative and inter-relatedness of policy change and how it has been experienced by diverse groups of Canadians.

Forty Canadian families were recruited by Neysmith and her research team to participate in a project supported by the Laidlaw Foundation and the Caledon Institute. This book is a major outcome of this "Speaking Out" project. The families chosen are themselves of interest – representing almost the full spectrum of contemporary living arrangements, with participants drawn from communities across Ontario. Anne is a lone mother with four children; Rosie and Bob are a

fixed-income-reliant couple in their late 50s; Aida and Xavier are Latin American refugees with three children; James is a young Inuit man with sporadic employment; Cheryl and Paul are a middle-income white family with two sons; Frank and Michael are a high-income gay couple; Brad is a young white man living on and off the streets; and Sabrina and Elizabeth are roommates sharing a house with others. It is this diversity of backgrounds that offer both authors and readers so much possibility in terms of analyzing and understanding public policy change and its compounding nature. Four interviews took place with each household over a three-year period, so one follows the ups and downs in families' lives, enabling readers to see how changes in one policy realm have at times a ricocheting effect, spilling over into other areas of people's lives. It is striking, too, how many of the family units with children were doing less well (11) by the study's end. The authors obligingly chart these outcomes in an appendix (pp. 224–225) for those who might wish to turn complex qualitative research into a simpler numbers game.

The case of Teresa illustrates the multiple and compounding effects of policy change. A white woman in her 30s with a disability, Teresa was training as a medical secretary at a community college when the Province of Ontario stopped funding post secondary programs for people on social assistance, or, as in Teresa's case, for those who had been on Family Benefits Allowance. Teresa could have continued her program only by going off social assistance and financing both her education and living expenses with funding from the Ontario Student Assistance program—primarily a student loan program. As she had both ongoing drug costs that would no longer have been covered and frequent hospitalizations that would have interrupted her studies, Teresa chose to remain on the new Ontario Disability Support Program and abandon job training. With labour market re-entry now unlikely, Teresa was also coping with substantially reduced benefit levels. Out-of-pocket health expenses also increased as some drugs and medical services were de-listed. Community programs and general interest courses that Teresa had relied on for social engagement were being cut back, or user fess were instituted. With combined reductions in attendant care hours and reduced wheel transit availability, Teresa's world got smaller and harder to manage at the very time she most needed these resources and participation in a larger community. Not eating was Teresa's only way to ensure she had money for other necessities such as an epi-pen or a taxi. She summed up her situation saying, "It's like you live in fear waiting to see what's going to happen" (p. 32).

Four of the eleven households that the authors conclude are better off at study's end improved their circumstance not through the redemptive value of secure labour market attachment but as a result of partnering with someone who was better off or of moving back into a parent's home. It is interesting to view this in the larger context of Canadian poverty statistics. Mother-led families are one of Canada's fastest growing population groups and systematically among the poorest. Over 40% of Canada's poor children live in such a household (Statistics Canada, 2005). So, when groups like Campaign 2000 exhort Canadians to

eliminate child poverty, we are encouraged to focus our attention on poor kids rather than acknowledging their likely less appealing poor parents. The reality of poverty in Canada is that it is intensely gendered; at every age, women are more likely than men to have lower incomes (Statistics Canada, 2005). And stories like those of Angie and Barbara demonstrate that there are few routes out of poverty for low-income Canadian women. Of the 17 households the authors identify as doing less well over the course of the research, all but four are lone-mother-led families or single women. By contrast, of those doing better, all but one included a male earner.

Neysmith, Bezanson, and O'Connell point, in their final chapter, to the importance of intersectionality in contemporary policy analysis. They do so, however, in a rather truncated manner that less than fully engages the theory. Fully articulated by Calliste and Dei (2000), the theory suggests that oppressions work in various interlocking ways to marginalize and/or privilege groups on the basis of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, language, ability, nationality, and so forth. Although Neysmith et al. attend in a general way to interconnectedness and the cumulative and multiple impacts of public policy retrenchment, these ideas are underdeveloped by the authors. Systematically, the least well off are those with multiple, marginal identities (Caragata, 2003; Vosko, 2000). These analyses hold true for the households that are the focus in Neysmith et al.

Overall a compelling book that uses rich qualitative data to maximum effect, *Telling Tales* explores the dominant areas of public policy, including income insecurity, and gendered poverty, but it groups and situates policy issues rather than focusing singularly on income, health, welfare, etc. This structure works well in allowing the rich personal stories to reveal complexity and interconnectedness and it points to two chapters not usually part of such policy analyses. These focus on the myth of community and on social exclusion, and in both, the authors point importantly to the relationships between the state and the citizenry. Well accepted in our contemporary neo-liberal society is the notion that the individual is responsible for his/her well-being and that of their children. While fundamentally rooted in western liberal ideology, the salience and centrality of this notion has, nonetheless, waxed and waned over the last two centuries. Even among the original social contact theorists there were divisions about what such a view meant for the role and functions of the state and these debates have continued unabated with the 'less state, more individual responsibility' side in current favour. Marshall (1950) in his classic work on citizenship points to 'social citizenship' which followed, in his view, enfranchisement and access to the judicial process, as a third and desirable stage of democratization. More recently, theorists such as Fraser (1992) and Sen (2000) have pointed to linkages between a citizen's stake or interest in a society as a necessary prerequisite for social and political engagement and, further, that such engagement is necessary to maintaining desired degrees of social cohesion and the societal processes essential to our democratic traditions. These ideas are the basis of the discussion taken up by Neysmith et al. although they do not fully articulate these theoretical

and ideological roots. They do ponder, however, the implications of a society in which work, status in the labour market, and ensuing patterns of consumption have become so determinative of one's value as citizen. If the shaping of the public sphere is then, in turn, only in the hands of those who are economically successful, in each successive iteration it will be likely to consider less the needs of these 'others'. And as stories of Ray, and Sara and Anand, reveal, many of Neysmith's households are making valuable social contributions but—in other than the economic realm—we've stopped counting.

Not content with only "giving voice" to the households interviewed, Neysmith et al. prove their title true—with adept analyses and probing interviews, the tales are indeed telling—of significant public sphere retrenchment and the interrelated and interconnected nature and impact of public policy change. We see how these changes affect real Canadians and how those affected and then, in turn, become less effective as parents, workers, and citizens.

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