
The reception of disability policy in France: a life-story perspective on policy change

Anne Revillard*¹

¹Observatoire sociologique du changement - Laboratoire interdisciplinaire d'évaluation des politiques publiques (OSC-LIEPP, Sciences Po) – CNRS : UMR7049, Sciences Po – France

Abstract

French disability policy has undergone important transformations in the past decades, leading to a complex mix of orientations, between protection, compensation and antidiscrimination, drawing on different approaches to disability (Chauvière, 2003 ; Winance, Ville et Ravaud, 2007). The aim of this paper is to demonstrate the relevance of a life-story perspective (based on biographical interviews with ordinary people) to tackle the evolution and the complex contemporary reality of disability policy (Engel et Munger, 2003 ; Shah et Priestley, 2011). I use biographical interviews as a way to trace policy reception, defined as the processes by which a given public policy is perceived, appropriated and mobilized by its target population, and by which it produces both material and symbolic effects on the latter. Drawing on 29 interviews with persons with visual or mobility impairments, the paper distinguishes two types of (both methodological and analytical) uses of life-story research in this perspective. First, the comparison of individual life stories taken as a whole helps identify structural tendencies in policy reception: the extent of the policy change can be documented by the comparison of the life-stories of different generations of people, while the comparison of the life-stories of men and women hints at structural gender differences, for example. Secondly, the more detailed thematic content analysis of the interviews sheds light on the reception of specific policy devices as well as various forms of resistance and claim-making. The case of disability policy thus reveals how much can be learned about a policy by radically decentering the focus from its institutions and listening to the diverse experiences of its target population.

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*Speaker