



The emerging mental health strategy of the European Union: A multi-level work-in-progress

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Abstract

Policy-making in the European Union (EU) is a complex process that can appear impenetrable and opaque. This paper examines the ongoing process of mental health policy-making in the EU. In 2005, the Health and Consumer Protectorate Director-General of the European Commission published a Green Paper and launched a consultation process aimed at mental health service-users, advocates, providers, business, social services and governments. While there were varying levels of participation between member states, a range of trans-national, national and infra-national actors made contributions. Based on these consultations, a ‘Consultative Platform’ was created and made 10 recommendations centered on the principles of partnership; establishing policy competencies; integrating mental health into national policies; involving stakeholders; and protecting human rights. This ongoing process illustrates many features of EU policy-making: (a) the European Commission generates an initiative; (b) policy focuses on EU standardization, with member states remaining central actors in service-delivery; (c) policy focuses on social inclusion; (d) the European Commission coordinates diverse networks of actors; and (e) there is ‘multi-level’ involvement, with direct interaction between trans-national, national and infra-national actors. An enhanced focus on epidemiological data and ‘evidence-based policy’ would increase rigor and focus further attention on this relatively neglected policy area.

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1. Introduction

Policy-making in the European Union (EU) is a complex process that can appear impenetrable and opaque to onlookers and participants alike. The purpose of this paper is to examine EU policy-making in one specific area: mental health.

While the provision of mental health services in EU states has been indirectly affected by various elements of EU policy in recent decades (e.g. health service regulations, social and employment policy), the EU has never developed an overall strategy in relation to mental health. In January 2005 the World Health Organization’s European Ministerial Conference on Mental Health invited the European Commission to contribute to the implementation of a framework for comprehensive action in relation to mental health.

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In response to this invitation, the Health and Consumer Protectorate Director-General of the European Commission published a Green Paper entitled “Improving the mental health of the population: Towards a strategy on mental health for the European Union” [1]. The purpose of the Green Paper was “to launch a debate with the European institutions, governments, health professionals, stakeholders in other sectors, civil society including patient organizations, and the research community about the relevance of mental health for the EU, the need for a strategy at EU level and its possible priorities” [1].

This paper aims to:

- Outline the overall policy-making context in which this strategy is being developed, with particular emphasis on policy modes and multi-level governance within the EU (Section 2).
- Explore the mental health policy contexts in which this strategy is to be developed and implemented, with particular emphasis on principles of mental health policy and practice across member states (Section 3).
- Outline the rationale behind the strategy development; the ongoing consultation process; and the current status of the emerging strategy (Section 4).
- Draw relevant conclusions and outline likely future directions for this process (Section 5).

2. Policy-making in the European Union

2.1. Policy modes

The emergence of policy initiatives in the EU reflects a range of heterogeneous, evolving and frequently complex processes [2,3]. A wide variety of institutions, committees and other actors produce, debate and revise policy ideas, resulting in a vast, amorphous policy arena in which there is much activity and interconnectivity—and in which it can be difficult to determine the precise direction of change [3]. The ‘garbage can’ model suggests that decision situations in such ‘organized anarchies’ are characterized by the existence of problematic preferences, unclear terminology and fluid participation amongst relevant actors [4]. These characteristics can be usefully applied to many decision situations within the

EU, especially in the early stages of policy formation. As the process progresses, there is a process of ‘natural selection’ by which certain policy proposals are modified, improved and selected from the range of options that has emerged; i.e. from the ‘policy soup’ [5]. Policy coordination may occur through the emergence of ‘epistemic communities’ which comprise experts with authoritative knowledge of a particular domain, a range of shared values and a willingness to engage in common policy enterprises [6].

It is unlikely that any single universal theory will fully explain the entire range of processes that lead to policy formation in the EU, so the development of ‘partial theories’ or delineation of specific, observed ‘policy modes’ may represent more reasonable approaches to this field. Wallace [7] identifies five principal modes by which policy is formed in the EU:

- (a) *The traditional community method*, in which the European Commission generates policy initiatives; the Council of Ministers assumes an enabling role; elected representatives have a limited role; and there is an overall transfer of power from the national to the ‘supra-national’ level.
- (b) *The EU regulatory model*, in which the European Commission designs objectives and rules; the Council of Ministers agrees minimum standards and directions of harmonization; there is extensive consultation with stakeholders; and the European Parliament has opportunity to raise non-economic issues (e.g. environmental concerns).
- (c) *The EU distributional mode*, in which the European Commission consults and devises programs; member governments negotiate redistributive budgets; regional priorities may be reflected through the European Parliament; and other stakeholders may similarly influence the process.
- (d) *Policy coordination*, in which the European Commission establishes networks of relevant actors (e.g. stakeholders, experts); the Council of Ministers establishes high-level brain-storming processes; and there is dialogue with specific elements within the European Parliament.
- (e) *Intensive transgovernmentalism*, which is centered on interactions between national bodies rather than EU institutions, with the European Council determining overall policy direction and the Council of Ministers playing a central coordinating role.

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