Social work practice
and social science history

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Abstract: *Social work may be regarded as a product of the Enlightment together with other social sciences. The ontological shift from religious perspectives to a secularly based responsibility that opens up for political as well as individual action is regarded as a baseline for modern social work. Social work itself has struggled to develop an academic identity and a sustainable social field within the social sciences. Social work has historically experienced a gap between research and practice, relating to social sciences and other subjects as part of its teaching without a firm scientific foundation for social works own practice. If social work earlier developed related to ideas of welfare and social policy in practice it may now be moving in a new direction towards more than being based on scientific development within its own field. Over the last decades the need for scientific development within social work has strengthened its relation to research and social science. There seems to be arguments to support that social work is moving with research in directions which may be regarded as an epistemological turn based on understanding of knowledge production as well as a linguistic turn where the construction of meaning enhance the importance of regarding different lifeworlds and worldviews as basis for claiming some egalitarian positions for different positions as clients as well as researchers and practitioners.*

Key words: *social work,; science history; knowledge production; respect and recognition.*

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Introduction

Reading social work literature leaves one with the impression of a troubled relationship between academic and professional practice. Is it possible to envision practice and research as integral parts of social work, and what are the preconditions that make this likely to happen now? In this chapter we explore this theme by reviewing the situation today in regard to social work history.

Like many other disciplines it is difficult to draw clear boundaries around social work. To some extent the field may be distinguished as limited to the profession of social work but this does not clarify the task and methods of social work. 'Social work' as such is not an exclusive word solely limited to the work of professionals. Teaching the discipline of social work is not purely just about social work either – it is about politics, psychology, sociology and so on. To some extent social work may be described as an eclectic field operating within the social milieu. One important feature is that it is often about changing and altering society– involving acts of change. People as individuals and groups may change their ways of living by acts of will (also including the will to want and work for change) – believing this to be a core idea within social work. Our idea is that seeing this possibility and applying this concept of social change and seeing how it operates in politics and in society at large, opened the way for modern social work. In fact there may not have been much social work until this change occurred and this fact marks the birth of the discipline in modernity. The epistemology follows the ontological change from pre-modern to modern societies.

To write the history of social work is also to write about the early work on sociology. It is also about the relationship between humanism, Christianity and charity – not so much about social science. To some extent we may also regard it as a politization of sociology. When it comes to the application of science to the subject, medical schools relate to natural sciences, in a similar way to social work's relationship to social sciences and humanities. Unlike medicine however, social work may be carried out by anyone as a social activity not just by a professional. As a social practice, anybody helping someone to sort out their relationship to others or renegotiating their own idea of self may say they have done social work. As a professional task it is also a social practice, but it has to relate to education, professional practice rules and methods, politics and research. In order to enter the social field of *professional social work*, one has to complete a basic education, and most professionals also identify with the professional code of ethics and the internationally agreed agenda for social workers (Global standards 2004). The new question arising is to what extent does the professional have to relate to scientific knowledge or scientific methods in practice to be regarded as a legitimate professional in the future? Social workers today seem to turn to colleagues rather than to research when they are in need of knowledge, or lack necessary arguments to support or make their decisions. Examples of the use of scientific texts are scarce

in practice (Lie et al. 2005; Socialstyrelsen 2005).

Reading earlier social work literature, such as Perlman (1957), Minahan and Pincus (1973), Compton & Galaway (1975) and Germain (1979), reveals how the authors related to different ideas of science. While Perlman claims her method as scientific due to the use of deduction based on systematic observation, Germain and Compton & Galaway rely on the diffusion of science validating itself through wide acceptance of the understanding it brings to the world (Marthinsen 1997). Habermas (1968) criticises these positions and claims that ideology will always replace the lack of knowledge in time whereas the agent or group of professionals will still claim or defend its scientific base. What is new in the application of the ideas of 'evidence based' practice is that the practitioners themselves may have to defend their own actions as both scientifically based and scientifically applied – which means they will have to be more research minded in their practices.

The position advanced in this collection of papers may be a combination of all of these concepts, since we discuss how better knowledge of research and practice together with users or citizens using services may enhance their knowledge about social work. What separates it from the modern ideas of knowledge building is that we are aiming for a new kind of practice where good actions and good results can be demonstrated and recorded but can never be the final outcome– there is no end to the process of knowledge making, and it reflects a distinct mindset, a thirst for knowledge.

This transition from educated professionals with limited scientific responsibility, to responsible actors within the scientific field, may be the most significant change social work has undergone. Politicians and managers will still be formally responsible but the social worker will look towards adopting the identity of a street level intellectual rather than a bureaucrat. Intellectual in the sense of Said[1] (1996,7) referring to Benda:

> Real intellectuals … are supposed to risk being burned at the stake, ostracized, or crucified. They are symbolic personages marked by their unyielding distance from practical concerns … with powerful personalities … in a state of almost permanent opposition to status quo …

Such a transformation would come on top of the political and ethical responsibility social workers are already burdened with, and would raise the standard of the whole field of practice.

A brief history of social work

Professional social work in Europe may be said to struggle for intellectual respectability with the traditional training establishments often situated outside universities in polytechnics or colleges. This has become very evident in the wake of the Bologna process introducing a new standard for education with bachelor, master and PhD. Social work did not usually find itself within this framework and has had to adjust in most countries (Labonté-Roset 2005). Professional practices are also facing a simultaneous challenge in the political demands for more scientifically based, or scientifically legitimated welfare practices – lately often confused with the prominently advocated position of evidence based practices and research. Conceptualizing the discipline of social work may be regarded as a look into a troubled and troubling trade.

Looking back

In this paper we will try to follow social work over a couple of centuries to explore the future boundaries of the subject – an attempt to read the signs and trends social work has to relate to at the outset of a new millennium. History may be an aid to a more critical stance towards dominant discourses. Reading through Nordic social work literature representing the last decade and having scanned through the content of major journals like the *British Journal of Social Work* and the *European Journal of Social Work* for the last five years, one is left with the impression of two significant discourses:

1. how does social work as a discipline respond to the demand for evidence based practice?, and
2. how does practice and academic research and education respond to and relate in general to the knowledge claim?

The articles which follow present research on practice and debates on organization and politics, and they also often respond to the current knowledge claim or are themselves a practical example of producing legitimate knowledge. Labonté-Roset (2007), representing the Alice-Salomon-University and EASSW, tries to present the kind of action-research-policy guaranteeing close cooperation between professional practice and social work. Karvinen, Pösö and Satka (1999, 11) argue that social work does not have its own theory or research methods but

> we must speak about more or less relevant ways in which they have been adapted to the practice of social work research.

This text is based on the idea that social work is a part of social sciences as well as social policy where it operates in welfare states like the Nordic countries. In many other countries however much of social work practice may rather be related to the actions of NGOs or the church, and/or other religious institutions. This article is based on a welfare state context. The question about who is to do the research and who is to do the social work in practice is not discussed here but in other papers in this journal.

Social work developed during a time of strong belief in the human capacity for personal transformation and in the ability of society to improve the opportunities required to do so (Parton 2000). McBeath and Webb (2002) argue that social work is formed within the social and cultural dimension of modernity. It relates to ideology as well as to scientific progress and developing insight into society. To various degrees social work also has to relate to science and research, and, as this collection of articles discusses, this seems to be rather important since it has become a requirement where social work is part of public policy. In his analysis of the origins of social work, Villadsen (2004) draws heavily on the philanthropic discourse and the expressed need to improve the lot of the poor and the weary. The reasons for their difficulties were suggested as being their own wrong decisions and lack of understanding, while the solutions relied heavily upon authoritarian action and punishment.

There is still a lot of ontological disagreement about the explanations for social problems, but while professional social workers may have gained a more complex understanding of the interplay between agent and structure, parts of their discourse still lean towards archaic solutions. On the whole social work has become part of social policy action in the Nordic countries as in many other parts of the western world, although some services   are still run by NGOs, the church and other institutions rather than by municipal authorities or the state. We are also witnessing how social work becomes part of the new structures of civil society in former communist and socialist countries. This collection of papers is not about the global expansion of social work, but it is an important factor to take into consideration when one discusses the challenges social work must face. If social work becomes part of the everyday life of more and more people, we have to be very critical of how the power exerted in the field is treated. Åkerstrøm Andersen (2003) are among the new younger writers focusing on the question of how social work ends up as an authoritarian force in society, leaving the citizen with the blame and the responsibility for creating and solving the social problems society has to face. Social work may also be said to play an important role in the construction of ever more sophisticated degrees of client dependency due to the proliferation of problems in people's everday lives (Parton, Thorpe & Wattam 1997; King 1997; Marthinsen 2003).

Is social work a child of modernity and the Enlightenment? – and if so, why so? The etymology of social work may reveal the strongest link to the Enlightenment

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period, since the word 'social' was reintroduced and used in many different concepts, such as society, socialism, social-antisocial. Webb (2007) asks why we ended up with the word 'social' rather than 'religious', 'philanthropic' or 'civic'. He argues that social was chosen because of the strong link it had to the new dominant ideas of modern society, the idea that society transcended the individual and led us into a discourse concerning the common good. There was a need for focus on self development and the creation of a reasonable and responsible citizen – not someone saved and taken into custody by the church. A responsible citizen was the cement of the social world (the state conceived as the society of societies in which all the claims upon each other are mutually adjusted) (op cit). The etymological base comes from the Latin *socius* meaning 'comrade' in the setting of the city, *civitas*. Civilization and social and society are three concepts very closely linked, and a *safe*, *predictable* and *just* world is projected into these concepts. The rise of the republic did not start with the revolutions, but with the rise of secret societies all over the western world. Societies which slowly infiltrated the men in power and left their mark on history. The idea of agency is also linked to the word social – the social man is a subject creating to some extent the social world. This philosophy dates back to Aristotle, but was revived through newer philosophers like Aquinas, Vico and later Kant and Hegel, ending up in the existentialism of Heidegger and Sartre, rearranged by Marxist-oriented phenomenologists like Bourdieu and Giddens in our own time. Man replaces God. Man becomes responsible for his own destiny.

Some claim that social work is as ancient as man, since we have always been social and caring beings, but this idea lacks a foundation in the worldviews of earlier times (Soydan 1993). If social work is strongly linked to the idea that man creates its own world(s), social work has to be linked to a discourse on the possibilities of active agency free from religious or mythical views – the idea of a disenchanted world that rose in the wake of the Enlightenment (Taylor 2007). There is a great portion of objective reality in social work, which helps to relate it to science, but the subject is also ambiguous. Habermas (1968) claims we retreat into ideology as soon as we run out of scientific arguments, and this is a boundary we seldom notice passing .. As a mainly communicative action, social work has to face the problems of interpretation, uncertainty and all that we do not know in real life – as well as its links to sensibility, the idea of a just world and to religiously founded brotherhood and politically founded solidarity (Parton 2000). Discussing the worldview of the Enlightenment, one should also consider the fact that the world then was regarded as developing into a far better state of existence (Darwin's idea of evolution is just one argument among many), not deteriorating and on its way to Armageddon. This gave man and science the upper hand and there was no need for religious saviours.

Let us have a closer look at history. Based on the above mentioned arguments, social work may be considered as a subject that developed together with sociology during the mid 18th century in Europe and North America. With the language of Kuhn (1962/1996) and Bourdieu (2004) sociology may be regarded as a new social

field growing out of philosophy. The development of knowledge about the social sciences was expected to have the same degree of ambition as the natural sciences; it should take a positive stand through objective empirical studies of the social world (Comte). This was a quest for reason in the social life which would leave the social scientist as the major force in the interpretation of the social world. Ideas that proved to be both a weapon and a tool in the hands of politicians and rulers in the centuries to follow. The rise of grand ideas is found in several utopian stories from the early medieval era (Moore 1516; Campanella 1602; Bacon 1627). These ideas threatened the feudal system and the existing monarchies to such an extent that even kings tried to adjust to the rising trend and build the ideas into their existing systems, like Louis XIV trying to be the sun king, building on a mixture of ancient ideas (Egyptian) of rule, and modern ideas about the state (Campanella). Humans have always had a longing for the good life, but for many centuries this longing was projected into a life after death and based on religious beliefs – a worldview which left the church and its servants with the power of sanctity. All power had to relate to this understanding of the world. Instead of living in time, one lived in high time with the focus on the afterlife and eternity (Taylor 2007). Modernity transformed this worldview and thus religion lost power to politics. Destiny was now in the hands of science.

The fantasies of pre-enlightenment times chart the transition from high time to modern times. Thomas More's *Utopia* was printed in 1512 as one of the first medieval narratives of a better world in real life. Utopias – meaning 'no place' but with strong connotations to the word *Eutopia* meaning the 'good place'. These worlds were usually encountered while lost at sea and finding the perfect place by accident, the society having developed out of reach of the known world. These stories seem to have developed as a risky discourse on changing the structure of the feudal society. Another story of this kind was *The City of the Sun*, by Tommaso Campanella [1568-1639], written in Italian in 1602, just after he was condemned to life imprisonment for sedition and heresy. In 1626 Francis Bacon published *New Atlantis*. Bacon also being one of the founders of the Royal Society (1660), legitimates the discourse on developing a new world based on scientific knowledge and not on belief. The model of the Royal Society was the early *Bureau d'Adresse* in France which inspired the establishment of offices and newspapers with the intention of publishing scientific knowledge and spreading the ideas of the Enlightenment. The discourse on new worlds and new forms of democracy inspired the establishment of societies such as the Quakers and other more short lived collective socialist experiments over the years to follow. Many of these were prosecuted and punished, and many fled to the new world bringing the ideas with them. During the mid 1800 there are thought to have been more than 150 of these societies in existence, living experiments of new ways of life (Frängsmyr 1980).

Ideas of how to rule and treat people developed long before we had any advanced social science analysis of individual, psychological development or social practices.

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What was to become sociology seems to have developed more as an ideologically based tool for social change and politics, rather than a social science. The idea of organising the whole of society on the basis of the powers contained within social science (the new ontology) seem to have developed before the idea of negotiating with individuals in society. Taylor (2007) claims that some of the first social experiments with socializing large populations were carried out by Bismarck in order to have a strong army with obedient soldiers, a goal he achieved through better education and living conditions – ideas that more often seem to be linked to the history of social democracy and social policy. Taylor's point is that waging war was a far more relevant subject for politics than building a fair and just society, and that we today seem to be confused about what aims really lay behind some of the social changes that occurred during the Enlightenment.

One of the first real life experiments, 'new Lanark', developed in industrial Manchester (1799). Robert Owen was a member of the Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society. Here he was introduced to new ideas and a different class of society and soon became friends with the leading intellectuals of the day, including Dr. Percival - pioneer in public health reform, the poet Coleridge and John Dalton the chemist. As an active member of the Society, Robert Owen took part in debates and presented papers on *'the improvement of the cotton industry, the utility of learning, universal happiness and industrialisation and social influences on belief'*. He left his mark on history as one of the most prominent social reformers of the period, a pioneer of modern British socialism and a source of inspiration to the co-operative and trade union movements.

> My intention was not merely to be a manager of cotton mills, but to change the conditions of the people who were surrounded by circumstances having an injurious influence upon the character of the entire population ... The community was a very wretched society and vice and immorality prevailed to a monstrous extent.

Owen's expectations of man were high;

> By my own experience and reflection I had ascertained that human nature is radically good, and is capable of being trained, educated and placed from birth in such manner, that all ultimately (that is as soon as the gross errors and corruptions of the present false and wicked system are overcome and destroyed) must become united, good, wise, wealthy and happy [2].

Simultaneously in France Saint-Simon (1760-1825) developed what Comte later would describe as the first attempt to make a society based on applied social science – sociology.

Henri de Saint-Simon is renowned as the founder of the 'Saint-Simonian' movement, a type of semi-mystical 'Christian-Scientific' socialism that pervaded the

19th Century. Saint-Simon envisaged the reorganization of society with an elite of philosophers, engineers and scientists leading a peaceful process of industrialization tamed by their 'rational' Christian-Humanism. His advocacy of a 'New Christianity' -- a secular humanist religion to replace the defunct traditional religions -- was to have scientists as priests (http://cepa.newschool.edu/het/profiles/saintsimon.htm)

It may be wise to note that there seems to be no reflection upon the problems or challenges related to biological or social diversity – perhaps one of the gross failures of early applied social science and the policies that were derived from the field. Believing in the omnipotent effects of education and good environments of certain kinds, seem to have created a cultural imperialism that led to marginalization and stereotypical ideals of man and society. All differently described people became clients and should be brought within the normal variation of society, or should be rendered extinct to purify the race. Before genetics were very well developed (before DNA history) many myths arising from these views resulted in grave maltreatment, exploitation and humiliation of despised categories of people. History shows we find the extremes in social democracies as well as in totalitarian states (Hirdman 1989).

Any educated social worker will easily see the traces of Owen's and Saint-Simon's scientific-political agenda in the ideas of the founding mothers of social work like Jane Addams and Mary Richmond - although the two had different view on society. They both had the strong belief in enlightenment as a practice, either on a social level in general or as casework with the citizen as such. They seem to converge around the theme of educating the poor. Social work may be as much a child as a stepchild of academe. In most of northern Europe schools of social work were established at the beginning of the 20th century - often associated with philanthropic organisations and women's emancipation. Alice Salomon established the Social School for Women in Berlin in 1899, which is now the Alice-Salomon University. In Chicago the School of Social Work was founded in 1946, today known as the Jane Addams College of Social Work. It still carries the same mission:

> … to educate professional social workers, develop knowledge, and provide leadership in the development and implementation of policies and services on behalf of the poor, the oppressed, racial and ethnic minorities, and other at-risk urban populations. In doing this, the college values and respects the full range of human diversity (Wikipedia 2008).

It was established after strong controversies within the field of sociology and social anthropology represented by a phenomenologist like Mead (Lewin 2000). Social work in the hands of Jane Addams became politics and eventually earned her the Nobel Peace Prize. In the Nordic countries scattered schools of social work grew up during the early 20th century, but the real expansion came after the post war eras with the investment in building professional services to carry out their ambitious social policy plans. In academe social work may be regarded as a socially concerned subject that departed from sociology and psychology to form a new distinct field

of its own – focusing on the applied side of social and psychological knowledge. In Germany and to some extent in the northern European area social pedagogy has developed alongside social work. In the Nordic countries social pedagogy has been related to work with children and young people, often in institutions. Sometimes a struggle surfaces in the discourse on social work where some would rather connect their identity to social pedagogy. The history of childhood thus becomes more visible and the traces of Rousseau and ideas about innocence and possible developments move into the centre of discourse rather than social change as such. Theories of agency in childhood emerged as a dominant view as well as the discussion of how this approach could also be applied to adults. (James, Jenks & Prout 1998).

Through most of the 20th century we may regard social work as a multi-subject field, focusing on developing a practice of social work based on a methodological discourse in the field of social work, but with no empirical science of its own. This may be due to the dominant epistemological view of how knowledge is diffused between science and professionals. Some professions did not evolve within the university, social work among them. The loose connection with the universities may explain some of the lack of research in the field but it is not the whole explanation. Even when social work entered the universities (in Norway and Sweden during the 1970s,) the amount of research on practical issues did not necessarily expand significantly. Many of the studies of the students look into social phenomena and social problems as such, but not at how social work is practised[3]. This may have to do with how the funding of research to some extent also decides what questions are researched. This again relates to the power structures of the academic world and social sciences as such. It took decades to produce professorships where the candidates would come from the field of social work itself. According to Bourdieu (2004) we may regard the establishment of a new subject in social sciences as the evolution of a new academic field creating a situation of tension within the already established system. This produced a situation where social work higher education and research had to fight their way against already established fields within the social sciences. Much of the resources then available for public research were spent on social policy, sociology, political science and other related fields. This research did not focus on social work as such but on the use of resources, how judgement was deployed, and the consequences of policy for individuals and society and other related topics. Outcomes could be studied, but not how different outcomes might be explained in terms of the results of different practices – it was seldom about the process as such.

Social work organizations like FORSA[4] in Sweden and Norway helped to put social work research on the agenda and for many years had to demand more resources for social work before the state would allocate resources in the field. This is not to say that these organizations were crucial to this development, but that they were themselves a sign of the times and could feed on the expanding knowledge claim of public services. Social work research in the Nordic countries has only

after the turn of the century received grants to develop services as a result of new knowledge claims. Some of the schools in the Nordic countries have developed research activities during the last decades, and there are research centres focusing on social work in different settings like child protection, work with young people and some with a more general focus on social work practices. The latest development is that of the joint ventures between municipal services and universities and colleges. These institutions aim to develop services through a stronger research focus on practice and knowledge production (Sociorama in Växjö, Sweden; Heikki Waris and Mathilda Wrede -institutes in Helsinki, Finland and the HUSK project in Norway).

Sociology developed into many specialist areas like political science, sociology of knowledge and so on, and became very dependent on the idea that objective social science was best represented by keeping a distance from politics and practice, relying on quantitative methods and leaving the study of the functioning of the human brain and emotions as such to subjects like psychology and neurology. Social work developed mainly as part of the welfare services in the Nordic countries, supported by a growing number of schools of social work, mostly established after the 1950s, but the epistemology was still heavily influenced by the dominant discourses in the social sciences, medicine, biology, chemistry and physics. As you look back in social work history over the last century however, you will find it moving from psychoanalysis, through systems theory and into social constructionism and bioengineering (Parton 2000).

The applied schools of social work have been for most of the period we have been discussing outside of the university sector, concentrating on producing formally qualified professionals, and responding to claims to legitimate practice. Social work as a university subject was established mainly from the 1970s onwards and later in some Scandinavian countries and not necessarily as part of the basic training of social workers. Sweden developed PhD programs in four universities during the 1980s and has since expanded. Finland has transformed their professional programs to master programs in 6 universities and have PhD programs in all the universities as well as a national PhD program. Denmark has so far only one master programme in social work (Aalborg University) and no specific PhD program for social work, but a joint program between different universities in related areas.

The academic field has to some extent been separate from the world of practice, marking an attractive distinction.. While academic success requires contemplation and individual concentration to acquire honours and promotion, the practice field receives its honours from politicians and administration through a set of complex forms of feedback, from user satisfaction, good budget policy and being efficient according to bureaucratic standards. Practice knowledge of research was often through critique of bad practices, as an illustration the first *Nordic Symposia on Social Work Research and Practice* were about bridging the gap (in Trondheim 1996 and Malmö 1997).

The Department of Social Work at the University of Trondheim (UiT, since 1996

NTNU) may serve as an example. The new schools of social work needed qualified teachers with higher university degrees in order to legitimise public investment in the schools, and therefore they had to be affiliated closer to the universities and the sciences as such through the development of research in the field. Among the arguments to establish the department at the UiT, 1974, was the idea that society needed social engineers who would have the skills to put an end to social problems related to the urbanization of the country. They would have to play a central role in developing sustainable social and physical planning and policies for modern life (Tronvoll & Marthinsen 2000). Social planning was thus the modus operandi of public politics. This tempted young, male social workers to apply in the early 1970s, but alas the world changed. According to one of the teachers at the department, together with her American professors imported to run the institute, she was very frustrated and disappointed because the students would not read the books on the curriculum, and were only interested in politics, attending demonstrations and quarrelling about how to run the university as a democratic and critical base for revolution. The establishment was hit by the impact of the 1968-upheaval. No social engineering developed, young men with 'industrial ambitions' were replaced by women social workers. The first students to receive their post-graduate qualifications were all women. After the first 10 years, with few applications the Department changed its policies and was turned into a regular social science academy with the focus on research and advanced social work theory. The Department now runs a masters and phD program in social work

Although the situation varies a lot around the world, in contrast to the somewhat offbeat position mentioned above, social work has long been a university degree and we have much of research in the field, journals, books and international conferences. We have professors of social work, we have researchers and we have well qualified teachers. We may rightfully claim that social work is a distinct social field within society as well as within research and academe, but its success is dependent on the symbolic capital acquired by social work within the social sciences (Bourdieu 2004). In the Nordic countries one may be tempted to say that the investment in research in social work is meagre, and representatives of academic social work often draw the short straw in competition for resources. The direct investment in knowledge production aimed at social work from state departments during the last decade may be easing the situation somewhat, but there is still a shortage of funding.

An epistemological turn

The social sciences were all influenced, and to some extent also in charge of the critique of the modern worldview and the idea of a neutral and objective science during the 1970s and 1980s, that changed the focus of research and the idea of

what science as well as knowledge was. Positivism moved from domination to a defensive position during the last quarter of the 20th century, partly because of its lack of sensitivity to culture and diversity. It was also a question of method – how do you research society ? Is objectivity a possibility? We experienced a dichotomous struggle between quantitative and qualitative research (Holter & Kalleberg 1972). Science itself came to be regarded as a part of the production of ideology (Habermas 1968), and social science became much influenced by the impact of phenomenology and post-structuralist theory. During the first phase of this scientific revolt, it was dominated by a critical position, but later we may describe the direction of the revolt as an epistemological change? or even maybe as a linguistic change. For the social sciences the discourse on social theory and the social construction of the world became crucial. The label post-modernity may be used to describe the rebellion, but modernity was not ready to be discarded so the terms were soon changed to late modernity or the post-structuralist era. The consequences of late modernity may be illustrated by how concepts change their reference. Modernity may crudely be identified by universalism, monoculture and true and false, the mode of description was the noun. Late modernity sees the global in the local, but not just universalism, but rather multiculturalism, where believing is related to the best argument and negotiable; the mode of description is the verb, and understanding replaces ideas of grand theory, based on acknowledging the socially situated nature of knowledge. This change has affected words related to social work like 'critical'. Critical was often related to or replaced by the word 'radical' implying the notion of a long awaited revolution or reform to move society towards the common good. Critical and radical were applied to leftist policy or political radicalism – it was socialism versus capitalism or conservatism. Words like empowerment came to be associated with radical as well. But radical today may rather be associated with fundamentalism – seeking universal solutions to systems with totalitarianism as an expected result. Not really very different from the way we may regard the radicalism of the 1970s – at least the most extreme forms. We still use the word critical and the discourse on critical social work may even be described as one of the most dominant in the field (Leonard, Dominelli et al., Ferguson, Haley, Olesen, Oltedal). We also operate with critical realism (Bashkar, Olesen). But the word radical seems to be replaced by reflexive as the relevant connotation. Words like empowerment seems to have changed their connotation too, and may also be related to reflexivity and knowledge, or to the mastering of the situation by contextualizing the agent in the structure with the space of possibility in mind. Right and wrong is replaced by an intricate discourse on distinctions and power (or micropower). Foucault and his concept of the archaeology of knowledge and genealogy enter the social work discourse even more often - social work has to relate to Foucaultian concepts like discipline and pastoral power; the latter positioning the social worker in the place of the priest in traditional society – the one who tells you what is right and wrong…and produces a sense of guilt, shame and remorse.

Partly based on the more humble position in relation to science the voice of the user becomes more important as a validation and legitimation of knowledge. Acknowledgement of the subjective element in knowledge production and in the dissemination and implementation of knowledge, leads to a need to listen to user opinions and claims of justice. A new welfare law in Norway illustrate this change by including the word *respect* in its first paragraph. Respect, decency and authenticity have entered the scientific vocabulary and seem to represent paramount values in and for social work. Rawls' (1979/1999) theory of justice, and major works in social philosophy discussing the prerequisites for a sustainable civil society such as those of Nussbaum, Honneth, Sen, Bauman and others, may play a similar role in the discourse of social work today just as Freud and Bateson a generation or two ago.

The linguistic turn

Gadamer (2004 (1986), 447) claims that *being you can conceive, is language*. It is in language that being comes to light, the word opens up the world and sheds light on what is hidden. In order to discover this we have to engage in the play of language, where one word is a metaphor for another. Allegories and symbols serve to expand what is already known. Searching for words and finding them creates meaning. Sharing this with others is communication and at the same time construction of a common frame of reference. To agree to a necessary extent that what is represented by what is said by those words refers to the same thing. Gadamer refers to Hegel in his Phenomenology of the Spirit where he argues that the elementary movement of the spirit is when you have to recognize your own in what is unfamiliar or strange and then feel at home in it. Every person develops a sense of self and identity through the conception of language from a natural stage to a spiritual one where you find yourself within a language, culture(s) and your worlds' institutions. At the same time language never becomes reality; it is always a representation and thus metaphysical. This leaves every one of us in an existential position where we only have our own reference to the world as a worldview – a worldview where we, through language, habits and culture, may have some common understanding, but never identical and never true in a strict sense. This recognition led Derrida to exclaim that all that is solid melts into air – the melodrama of post-modernity soon to be confronted with all those claiming the world also consists of some sort of stability making social life and society possible (Searle 1997). Gadamer himself referred to *language* as the main carrier of tradition. Bourdieu developed the concept of *habitus* to count for some stability within the conception of the world. Both Habermas and Searle operate with the notion of *background* that resembles and represents the same phenomenon as Bourdieu with *habitus*. What makes Bourdieu interesting to social work is that he manages to create a toolbox for deconstructing the way the agent operates in the

structure, and on what conditions society operates. Late modernity seems to have settled for some consensus about agency and structure to be able to operate in a world with both stability and movement at the same time. Due to the prevailing uncertainty and to the lack of a thorough disciplinary force within society , we are all able to exert some kind of agency in our lives – there are some margins for freedom within any system. This is also the opportunity for social work – to renegotiate the formation of society , how individuals and groups relate to society, and how society relates to groups and individuals. Social work is thus perfectly fit to work in the field of changing people (Hasenfeld 1992).

The consequences of accepting an existential phenomenology is that no one can claim to know any certainty – one may only *claim* validity. Evidence has to pass through some judgement to become proof, and is as such left to operate within society as a contract.

Arendt (1971) draws in her work *The Life of the Mind* – separated into three themes; Thinking, Willing and Judging - on Husserl's notion of time, where thinking unfolds in the gap between past and future.

> The gap between past and future opens only in reflection, whose subject matter is what is absent – either what has already disappeared or what has not yet appeared. Reflection draws these two 'regions' into the mind's presence … a fight against time itself. It is only because 'he' thinks, and therefore is no longer carried along by the continuity of everyday life in a world of appearances, that past and future manifest themselves as pure entities, so that 'he' can become aware of a no-longer that pushes him forward and a not-yet that drives him back. (Arendt 1971, 206)

The language change has consequences for practice and research as well. To practise it may not be a notable and conscious change , but the need to listen to users, to be aware of the experience of the client, the client's view and the client's notion of meaning, represents a language change in the way that the focus of the dialogue has moved from the sender to the receiver. For research it becomes inevitable. It means that any text has to be interpreted; a sentence from one to another may be received with a new meaning differing from that of the speaker. This may produce misinterpretation but it might equally lead to a dialogue that ends in the opening up of a new horizon of understanding to both participants. Even the most stringent scientific article needs interpretation and the notion of *applied social science* sounds suspicious to a critical realist. The science to enhance understanding within such a context then becomes the one which deals with how the spirit operates in society – a far more complex task than applying a manual developed through scientific testing over limited time. In addition to these challenges, many of the tasks undertaken by social work are related to the construction of meaning in everyday life – to experiences of grief, loss, poverty and other socially experienced phenomena – not a broken leg, a house burnt down or a plane crashed. Most social work tasks

undertaken are related to the metaphysical sphere – how we experience the world – and how we put words and meanings to it.

This does not mean that social work and research in social work should move in the direction of reflexivity alone, but this may be an important modus operandi for working in the field. Quantitative inquiry should be used to reveal patterns and insight into phenomena where no cognitive grip may be possible and where the volume of observations otherwise leads to the creation of myths about practice. All inquiries are dependent on good categorization and meaningful concepts and thus almost immediately require some good foot work ahead of any attempt to study the questions posed.

From academe to practice

For the period covering the late 19th and early 20th century it may be correct to relate social work closely to the rise of social science. However, the establishment of schools of social work outside the universities permitted a new semi-professional development – as in other fields in health and social affairs. For a long time the schools of social work were organized with teaching in several subjects related to society, health and mental well-being. Subjects like law, medicine, psychiatry, family therapy and so on were taught alongside the methods of social work; defined as work with individuals and groups and later society (*samfunnsarbeid*). Professional legitimacy was guaranteed by the quality of teaching and teaching staff[5]. The establishment of university degrees at post-graduate level was also linked to the need for research on how to cope with the social and individual problems related to urbanization and modernization of traditional societies which were being transforming into modern industrialized civilizations (Marthinsen 2001). The establishment of post-graduate social work studies in universities both in Norway and Sweden during the 1970s created a situation where professional training was provided in schools of social work while post-graduate level studies took place in universities. While Norway chose to hire emeritus professors in social work from the USA, Sweden established its post-graduate curriculum with professors from sociology and psychology. Such a situation did not leave much scope for an autonomous field to emerge. While Sweden established a PhD program, Norway chose to follow their own system with the 'major' as something in between a master program and a PhD. In Finland doctoral programs were established at first in the early 1980s as part of social sciences under the discipline of social policy. In the mid 1990s this ended in the establishment of a national graduate school in social work supported by the Ministry of Education. This occurred some years before social work became a fully established academic discipline of its own as part of social sciences departments.

During the late 1980s and the 1990s we experienced a vast expansion of the

welfare systems in much of the western world. In Scandinavia we had an increasing number of clients both in child and family services and as recipients of social services (both income support and services for the elderly). Budgets rose as a result of increasing staff levels as well as from there being more clients and more people reliant on public support for their basic needs. New ideas of management demanded cost efficiency and quality indicators, and this enhanced the demand for research. Related to the growth of social work in general, we have seen, over the last two decades, the establishment of both child and family research centres. During the last decades of the 20th century we had a development of two distinct separate fields, research relating to an international discourse on social science – and a growing number of schools of social work trying to relate to a globalized world. There seemed to be a gap between schools of social work and practice, as well as between practice and research. The international social work organizations became an arena for these discrepancies. To put it bluntly, while IASSW[6] reflected the views of an aging group of teachers discussing education, the IFSW[7] kept in touch with politics and research and attracted more and more attention from practitioners and managers all over the world. Especially in Europe there was a need for cooperation and the European conferences became joint ventures for the two organizations also contributing to bridging the gap. In the Nordic countries the FORSA conferences took a large chunk of the conference time available and there was a need to make a deal to change to biannual arrangements with IASSW.

The request for research based knowledge increased as new public management required quality assurance and efficiency measures. This made the lack of (evidence based) research obvious to politicians and managers, and several countries started to invest in knowledge production and dissemination in social work and related fields. The UK established the first centres of excellence in social work and the first reviews were started to enable a presentation of the scientific basis available[8]. Establishing centres like NC2 and granting money for reviews revealed that there was no or very little of that kind of knowledge available anywhere in the world – not even in the USA. What we are experiencing today are the consequences of this revelation – a need for heavy investment in the development of scientifically sound social work research.

How had this situation developed? What made the scientific field in social work unable to deliver the goods asked of it ? Academic social work in the Nordic countries coincidentally developed during an era of very strong focus on qualitative research. Late 20th century social sciences were challenged by the influence of phenomenology and critical theory. Unlike other established sciences there was little traditional positivist social science to be continued alongside the opposing new ideas in social work. The lack of different competing research agendas within the field may explain some of the problems experienced today and to some extent the lack of resources; researchers, dedicated institutions and funding may also take the blame. The development of work processes was conceptualized with terms

such as 'reflective practices' (Karvinen 2001). Many studies have been explorative and there is always a danger of generalizing from small samples to the population, contributing to myths rather than expanding knowledge. In theorizing social work practices we also find a strong influence from the concept of tacit knowledge (Schön 1983) explaining the work processes of the reflexive practitioner. Schön´s theorizing of practice in fields where professionals have to act in changing situations requiring the use of judgement while in action, seems to have had a special affinity to social work. His work is frequently quoted among social work academics and not least in master and PhD work (Probably also a consequence of his work being on the curriculum). The combination of qualitative research and focus on theories enhancing the idea of tacit knowledge representing social work, has given insight into many intricate phenomena in social work practice and has enhanced knowledge of how we conceptualize the world. Paradoxically we may say, the writing about tacit knowledge seems to produce understanding based on things not being left unsaid but outspoken – putting words to the notions. A creative language produces knowledge. Very often research cooperation with practice turns the unseen and known into knowledge that may be articulated and used in the communication within the organization (Marthinsen & Clifford 1998).

Explorative research has produced knowledge on clientship and how clients conceive their life and experiences as clients. Sociology has similarly revealed the life and experiences of other oppressed groups and made their lives visible to politics and society (Halvorsen 2002). However, in spite of all the good that came out of this knowledge production, it never managed to solve the questions of efficiency in an expanding welfare system. On the contrary, use of thorough research methods enabling the varied results of practice to come to life, require costly research designs and infrastructure in the field of social work to produce valid and relevant information. Social work lacks much of the categorization developed in other professions to register work and determine what kind of tasks are performed to meet needs – although some systems exist in child protection. Work practices are not identified with stringent methodology, rather as eclectic and creative uses of judgement and personal skills (Engmark & Lundstrøm 2008). All this indicates that there is much work to be done before thorough research on method and practice as such can be introduced. Research in and with practice over the last decade has revealed these challenges in the field.

During the strong positivist era, social work had no position in the field of research politics and had few or no members of the societies with influence within the universities and the government9. Social work lobbying was strongly linked to social policy and run by social politicians and NGOs and had little or no relation to the academic field. They seem to have been concerned mostly with establishing social work and child protection as professional fields in the municipal services as part of developing a strong welfare state. As a new academic subject with little access to research funding, social work became very dependent on the individual's own

work and had little or no part in research centres. Academics in social work lacked the resources to engage in social research and could not compete with sociology and political science research submissions that were dominant in the field of social research.

The question of social work research has been contested in the UK as well, and Parton (2000) reflects on some of the struggles from the 1970s and onwards in ways that reveal a very similar situation to Scandinavia. He refers to Sheldon versus Jordan (1978) discussing the negative attitudes of many in the profession towards science. Sheldon argued for a more scientific and cumulative evaluation of the theoretical components of social work, and he also argued that there were many similarities between good research and good social work. He wanted 'a small injection of positivism – counterbalancing emphasis on what can actually be seen to have changed, rather than impressions of change inferred from conversations alone' (Sheldon 1978, 18) [10]. Sheldon's argument seems to be an early stage of the strategies later found under the ideas of evidence-based social work. Jordan disagreed strongly with Sheldon, arguing that social science as well as other sciences is strongly linked to power, and that social work had more to do with caring, changing and living with 'inevitable uncertainty, confusion and doubt'. Parton regards their disagreement along the axis from rational-technical to practical-moral. Parton at that time shared some of Jordan's views and argued that social work was very much about informal negotiation about roles and changing of life as such. What makes people clients of social work is that their lives are not ordinary any more, they do not live up to ideas of respectable and decent citizenship, and social workers are called in to negotiate, and only in rare situations have to apply formal, imposed solutions using their legal power. The challenge is how not to become too moralistic, and to avoid imposing bourgeois moral standards on working class people. Still it is about some kinds of 'normalization', specific norms of living (Parton 2000). This leads social work into a world of good judgement, ideas of reflexivity and change and knowledge of justice in a world of difference (Satka, Karvinen, Pösö 1998; Sennet 2003 etc). Social work is about being virtuous (McBeath & Webb 2002). Along this path, scientification tends to be about mastering knowledge of communication, language, and social constructionism.

Reflexivity and evidence

A brief look at some of the recent social work research literature seems to reveal some dominant discourses. Scientification may be achieved either through development of a sound reflexive position studying the agency of the social worker and enhancing their ability to think and judge, while the other alternative seems to be focusing on evidence based research and practices. Within the reflexivity-

discourse we also find the idea of social work as reflection-in-action (Schön 1983) and the ideas of agency and structure and the world as a site of globalization and late modernity (Giddens, Beck, Bourdieu, Baumann, Payne, Dominelli et al.). This discourse is partly identified as an opposition towards the discourse of evidence-based research and practice. Reflexive positions may lead to discussions of virtue and ethical considerations and to the opening up of more democratic ways of service development, since users may have a distinct voice in this kind of research based practice. Other positions may look at other traits, such as how critical may social work be? or to what extent does social work become a tool for new managerialism? In relation to scientification, there may be disagreement about how strongly social work practice should be involved in research, or what kind of research may produce sound results in practice. There are examples of quite large investments in building knowledge data bases (SCIE and Campbell), but little investment in discovering how practitioners use this knowledge, to what extent reading science produces better practices or whether it necessarily make practice scientific. Focusing on reflection, judgement and the development of a decent and just society may be regarded as one of the dominant discourses in social work.

Even though the epistemological turn helped social work re-enter the academic world without changing its practice, it may not have given social work the scientific legitimacy it may need to stay within the realm of the public in western society. Since all welfare policies are becoming very costly to taxpayers, all services have to prove their right to existence. Reflexivity and virtue does not seem to deliver the arguments necessary to allocate the resources needed, and they cannot support the arguments with the need to know what you get for the money – *how many bangs for the buck* is one of many slogans used by politicians and economists to illustrate this[11].

Social work has to be able to respond also to managerialism and new public management. This means no development of social work can solely focus on understanding and searching for insight into social phenomena. We also have to respond to the claim for a deconstruction of work whereby it is possible to answer questions of efficiency, and we may require social work also to ask questions about what kind of services we are developing. Are the services treating citizens with decency and respect? This requires a will to spend money on research in practice and to develop practices with feedback loops that allows for both first and second order analysis. What works for whom, and what kind of world are we creating with and for these people? Whose interests are research and practice in social work defending?

At last the expansion of knowledge production into practice does not only seem like a system demand. Gibbons et al. (2007) explains the expansion of knowledge production outside universities as a result of the vast expansion in higher level education. The demand for scientifically oriented knowledge has increased and become a symbolic capital within management and also a necessity in order to be competitive and develop efficiency. Knowledge production in this new setting is categorized as mode II knowledge production. This mode encompasses practice

and knowledge while mode I refers to scientists and science. The concept is further elaborated on by Tove Rasmussen in the next paper in this issue.

Further throughout this issue we discuss how the gap between research and practice may be bridged, we look at some experiences of research in and with practice – even with users involved. Under what conditions may one create knowledge, for whom and to serve what interests? What do we mean by practice research and how can the concept be operationalized?

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Webb Stephen A (2007): The comfort of strangers: social work, modernity and late Victorian England Part II. *European Journal of Social Work* 10 (2) pp. 193-207.

Notes

1   Said, Edward (1996): *Representations of the intellectual*. Vintage books.
2   http://midwales.com/peopleplaces/rowen/
3   This is based on a review of the first 100 major theses in Norway (1975- 2000) and the first 15 doctorate works in Norway.
4   FORSA, foreningen for forskning i sosialt arbeid, the Association for Research in Social Work, has been established in all Nordic countries during the last two decades.
5   the development used here as an example counts primarily for Norway (Marthinsen og Tronvoll 2000).
6   International Association of Schools and Social Work
7   International Association of Social Work
8   Exeter centre of excellence and SCIE were established during the 1990s funded by public investments under Tony Blair.
9   Speaking mostly of Norway here
10   Sheldon 1978. p.18
11   Quote from a lecture by a rep. of the Norwegian Bureau of Statistics.