

# Knowledge production and social work: Forming knowledge production

Tove Rasmussen<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** Practice research can in itself be regarded as a specific form of knowledge production in social work with substantial potentials. Its possibilities as well as its challenges depend on the broader picture of knowledge production in the field. Important phenomena and trends in this broader picture are identified and discussed by using three perspectives on knowledge production: the epistemology, sociology of knowledge, and conceptualization of professions. Challenges can be identified in several of the newer trends and may be most clearly seen in the substantial changes in the dominant societal re-creation of 'professionalism', which at the same time from a traditional point of view must be regarded as deprofessionalization. It is suggested, that practice research in this situation can play an important role in a knowledge production scaffolding a new understanding of professionalism and expertise.

**Key words:** epistemology; sociology of knowledge; professionalism; institutionalization; practice research

1. Senior Lecturer, Via University College

**Address for correspondence:** Skejbyvej 15, 8240 Risskov, Aarhus, Denmark

## **Introduction**

Not only new knowledge but also knowledge production itself has become an important issue in social work. Knowledge in social work has been discussed with respect to its reliability and utility (for example, evidence-based social work), whether it is situated, tacit or reflexive, and as professional knowledge under pressure, but increasingly the question of knowledge production itself has become an issue. An important aspect of practice research is that it represents a challenge to the dominant institutionalization of knowledge production. In this respect, the aim of practice research is to claim legitimacy for certain types of knowledge and to develop processes to produce them.

This is a challenge in a knowledge or information society (Bell 1974) which is characterized by several new tendencies in the governing and production of knowledge. Practice research may be an answer to the scepticism about, and criticisms of, (traditional) expert knowledge in late modernity (Giddens 2000) or in the risk society (Beck 1992). If we consider practice research as a particular form of knowledge production and 'implementation', three perspectives will help us understand the development of such knowledge: the epistemology, sociology of knowledge and conceptualization of professions. Using different theories and research results, the aim here is to use a different perspective to sketch the point of departure, prerequisites and possible dilemmas for practice research rather than to present any kind of fully developed theory in the area.

## **From knowledge to knowledge production**

Society is changing ever more rapidly, challenging many of the hitherto known 'ways of thinking' and categories used in everyday life, as well as in the social sciences.

In my view it simply has become too difficult not to be a constructivist. Regardless of the field of social science one focuses on, the most noticeable thing is change, and changes often touch upon or challenge fundamental values, raising questions about the constituent character of what we see. (Åkerstrøm Andersen 1999, 9)<sup>1</sup>

Not only are we witnessing change and frequent suggestions (or demands) to use new concepts but also there are clear signs that knowledge has gained another role in society. The simple, rational (but now also naïve) picture of neutral knowledge, that it is *first* produced and *later* used in different areas, is increasingly being replaced by an almost opposite logic. Now, when a new agenda, way of branding or strategy is decided, there is a demand for knowledge to support the decisions.

Within government ... discursive institutions have been established in order to develop scientific discourses and to diagnose the condition of society, with the intention of controlling the political agenda, defining the framework for negotiation and installing a sense of responsibility in organisations, political parties and individuals. (Åkerström Andersen 1999, 11)

Constructivist perspectives are one way of dealing with the 'hidden premises' of knowledge production. Instead of using the 'new language' and concepts as points of departure in research, research can be used to reveal the creation of these new perspectives, concepts and agendas, or in other words to de-ontologize the creations.

The so-called 'epistemological turn', which has had a widespread influence in English language discussions of social work (Healy 2000; Howe 1994; Leonard 1994; Parton 1995; Parton & O'Byrne 2000; Pease & Fook 1999) (Leonard 1994)<sup>2</sup> can be seen (as suggested above) as a necessarily scientific answer to important changes in the knowledge society. Although some of the premises of 'postmodernism' can be debated, there is no doubt that this development in scientific research has brought new perspectives on social work to the field, as well as generating new knowledge.

When we recognize that one of the premises of the social sciences must be the idea that societal phenomena are inseparable from our subjective conceptions of them (leaving no 'neutral place' for the scientist), the question of knowledge – everyday knowledge as well as scientific knowledge – takes on new meaning. It becomes relevant to pose questions about different types of knowledge, such as practice knowledge, which can be seen as simply different from scientific knowledge rather than inferior to it. It becomes important to work not only with the concepts and categories used in social work practice but also with those used in science. We should not assume that science possesses the only 'true' concepts, theories and categories.<sup>3</sup> We should also be willing to question the concept of expertise, which has often been conceptualized in traditional science as a form of scientific knowledge rather than as a 'way of thinking' that is useful to practitioners (Karvinen-Niinikoski 2005; Satka & Karvinen 1999; Schön 2001).

The epistemological turn, read as excluding naïve realist and universal perspectives, can also be seen as one of the prerequisites for practice research, or at least practice research in its newly relevant incarnation. This does not mean that practice research should be restricted to one (for example, purely constructivist) scientific perspective but only that in addition to producing scientific knowledge (which is presumed to be useful for social work), practice research can also question how knowledge is produced and used. If social science cannot deliver universal (or just relatively stable and transnational) knowledge about dominant social problems (and the best ways to solve them),<sup>4</sup> or even produce common reliable concepts and categories, the obvious answer is to produce knowledge in the context where it will be used. We must also consider how different forms of knowledge can be combined or brought into a fruitful interplay. If it is not possible to define the different

problems that social workers encounter or to determine relevant measures, then the question of how social phenomena are conceptualized becomes as important as the phenomena themselves, and it becomes important in turn to consider how different conceptions of social phenomena are developed in relation to practice research.

These types of questions and discussions, and the growing strategic attitude towards knowledge production in different fields of society, clearly point to the need for other types of knowledge production, such as those generated in practice research.

### **The institutional aspect of (scientific) knowledge production**

Knowledge production can be discussed in terms of the sociology of knowledge.<sup>5</sup> From this perspective, it becomes important to analyse the institutionalization of knowledge production. The dominant form of institutionalization expresses the normal conceptions of what constitutes different types of knowledge, possible hierarchies of knowledge, and the formal procedures and institutions needed to produce, for example, scientific knowledge.

If practice research represents a challenge to the dominant institutionalization of knowledge production, we must examine the opportunities and difficulties this presents. Social institutions are not easily changed, but there are changes taking place in the relationship between knowledge production in the scientific and practical fields, and practice research is a part of those changes.

Gibbons and colleagues claim that the 'modes' or regimes of knowledge production have changed (Gibbons et al. 1994). The traditional institutionalization of knowledge production at universities or other scientific institutions is called 'Mode 1'. In this regime, knowledge is produced in traditional scientific hierarchies, organized in disciplines, and secured by peer reviews. Cognition and 'true' knowledge are the products. The emerging type of knowledge production, which tries to produce knowledge that is useful or relevant to actors outside the university, is called 'Mode 2'. It includes people from different fields (both inside and outside scientific institutions), tends to be transdisciplinary, and is organized in non-hierarchical networks. Rather than peer-reviewed products published in scientific journals, the products are evaluated on their usefulness in the context for which they are produced.

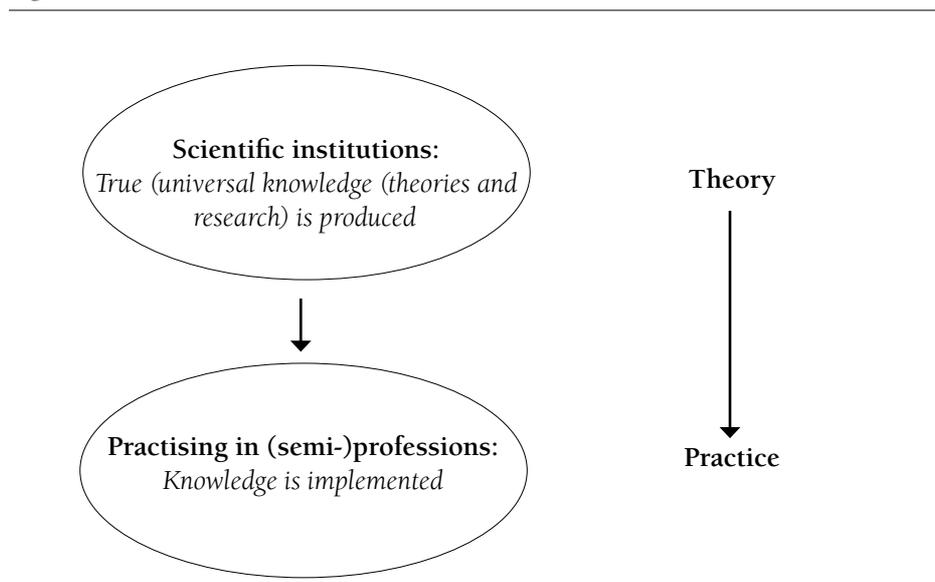
According to Gibbons et al. Mode 2 is a growing form of knowledge production that exists alongside the traditional Mode 1 form of knowledge production. Mode 2 represents a new way of organizing the interplay between science and society (Table 1).

Table 1  
Modes of knowledge production

	Mode 1	Mode 2
Orientation	Cognition	Usefulness, application
Formal organization	Universities,	Co-operation between scientific institutes different types of organizations, universities, companies, public sector, etc.
Organizational type	Scientific hierarchies	Networks
Knowledge	True	Reflexive
Output and quality control	Scientific journals, peer review	Networks, usefulness

A closer look at Mode 1 in relation to knowledge in social work is depicted in figure 1.

Figure 1



The one-way arrow reflects how reliable knowledge is thought to be produced, and following the premises, it is only when practice in social work is based on implemented scientific knowledge that one can speak of knowledge-based (or traditional) professional work.

It is questionable how closely this model reflects the reality of social work,<sup>6</sup> but it still represents the widespread and officially supported<sup>7</sup> conception of how

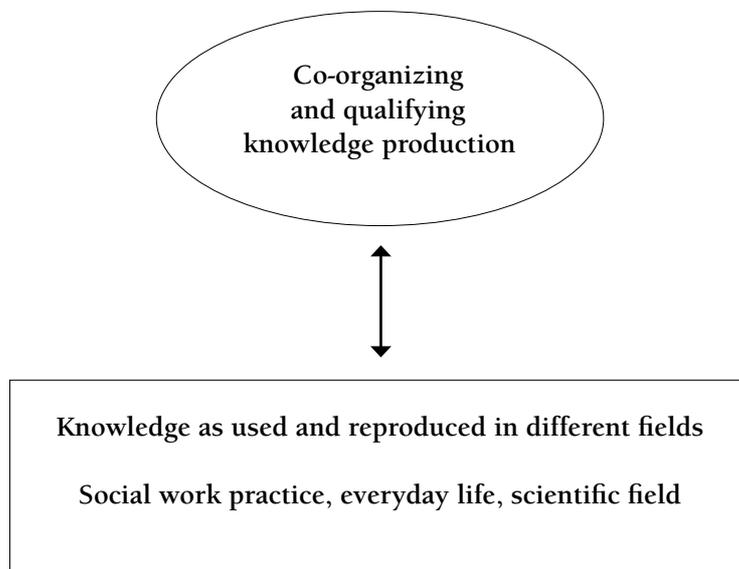
knowledge in the field of social work is created and used. Some of the problems in the very long (and often unfruitful) discussion of the relation between theory and practice, could be attributed to this model (and to the epistemological turn noted previously): if the modelling of a situation is inconsistent with the way things are perceived to work, it will tend to produce a lack of understanding and/or inconsistencies in central concepts.

It seems obvious that the development of scientific knowledge production in social work could be fruitfully supplemented with knowledge production that follows the principles of Mode 2. Practice research is better characterized as this type of knowledge production. Mode 2 provides a much better framework for the central issues in practice research, because it more directly addresses the problems and needs of practitioners in the field. When practitioners form networks, they can develop the perspectives, concepts and categories that are relevant to their needs. The question of ‘implementing’ research results would drastically change under this regime, because the ‘users’ are also co-producers. By generating knowledge gained from different positions and perspectives, such research would be reflexive and well grounded in specific practices rather than presuming to produce the one right answer to address one pre-described category of problems or methods.

In its most radical form, the premises of practice research can be expressed in figure 2.

Figure 2

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The process of knowledge production cannot be seen as restricted to the scientific field. Knowledge production (which involves the use of different perspectives or 'theories' and reflection) occurs not only in scientific fields but also in the practice of social work and in the daily life of the citizen as well, albeit with different premises and goals in different institutional settings. Practice research can be seen as a set of processes that organize and qualify knowledge production across different institutional settings.

However, there are still major dilemmas in using 'new modes' of knowledge production. Both inside and outside of science, institutionalized modes of knowledge production are deeply connected to the judgements of actors (including decision-makers) from different fields who define, for example, what is or is not scientific. The question is not just about making the most rational and justified choice about how to produce the most 'useful' knowledge. The 'status' of the knowledge that is produced can itself be important for the development of future knowledge production.

If Perlizzione is right, when he claims, that radical uncertainty or the epistemological turn on the one side replaced the modern image of knowledge as able to produce one description by, for example, shared concept and standardized ways of combining and analyzing facts – and on the other *preserved* that 'modernity has given science the status as the only truly public knowledge' (Pellizzoni 2003), the distinction between scientific and other types of knowledge cannot be ignored in practice research.

Is it possible to preserve the status of the scientific part of knowledge production in Mode 2 when some of the hitherto important premises, procedures and institutions are questioned in the process of organizing and qualifying knowledge? Research shows that there might be difficulties.

With respect to Mode 2, some have questioned whether the description of the historical movement from Mode 1 to Mode 2 is adequate.<sup>9</sup> If it is not, one cannot expect ongoing changes in the criteria used to value the status of research (Pestre 2003).

*Within* science, researchers have identified problems in the status or symbolic capital (Albert 2003; Bourdieu 1996) of Mode 2 research, and questioned whether a trend towards strengthening Mode 2 types of knowledge production is valid. There may well be a return to Mode 1 approaches, even though there is pressure from 'epistemological turn' in its narrow and procedure prescribing sense, critics regarding its 'ritualistic mode of rationality' (Starbuck 2006), where the accepted methods and questions are often preferred (and supported by research organizations) over attempts to answer important new research questions. Despite these criticisms, symbolic capital in scientific fields still tends to hinge on Mode 1 knowledge production, which can be published in prestigious peer-reviewed journals.<sup>10</sup> New systems of evaluating research by counting published output may reinforce this tendency (depending on the exact form of system), even if unintentionally. Mode 2 research, then, may be regarded (and perhaps also formally measured) as 'low-grade'

research (low symbolic capital), which may make it difficult to finance projects, recruit researchers and fill positions. There is, however, no direct connection between symbolic capital in scientific fields and symbolic capital in other fields, such as outside institutions, which can be partners in research and financing.

*Outside* of science, and in the relationship between scientific and other fields (for example, the political), Mode 2 research approaches also have problems related to the traditional institutionalization of knowledge production. Discussions of, and political support for, evidence-based professional work might be taken as an illustration.

Evidence based research in social work has grown and gained considerable acceptance in political systems in Nordic Countries (see, for example, the specific type of evidence-based research advocated by the Nordic Campbell Center.<sup>11</sup>) As a form of knowledge production, evidence-based research in social work has characteristics of both Mode 1 and Mode 2 regimes. It is similar to Mode 2 research approaches because it aims to produce useful and socially relevant information, and because it emphasizes networking with politicians, leaders in the field and other professionals.<sup>12</sup> However, evidence based-knowledge production is also similar to Mode 1 research approaches in their most traditional form, because it:

- claims to be scientific *because* specific methods, procedures and peer review activities, are used,
- claims to produce universal knowledge, and
- uses the traditional model for application or implementation (as described above).

This type of evidence-based research follows the principles and methods of the natural sciences and in so doing draws on the prestige (or symbolic capital) of traditional natural science research.<sup>13</sup> Judged from a social science perspective, this kind of evidence-based knowledge has serious problems. Claims for universal knowledge about social conditions and processes have been heavily criticized in the sociological literature<sup>14</sup> and by the epistemological turn, both directly and indirectly (Krogstrup 2003; Pawson 2006)<sup>15</sup>.

Despite these criticisms, from outside of science, the evidence-based researchers' claims to scientific rigor – RCT and meta reviews – may well be the most convincing argument they make for the value of the knowledge they produce.

Practice research, of course, will have to deal with these types of problems. The problem of the status of knowledge could raise considerations about how practice research is organized – how its processes and parts relate to the dominant forms of institutional research. However, it could also suggest the need for further discussion of the distinction between scientific knowledge and other types of valuable knowledge.

## **Professionalism and knowledge production in social work (practice)**

For practice research, the conditions for and the framework of knowledge produced in practical social work is an important issue. As discussed with respect to scientific knowledge, knowledge derived from social work practice is gained in a particular societal context, and it should not be regarded as authentic knowledge. One of the important concepts connected to knowledge in social work practice is professionalism (or profession), which implies close connections to scientifically produced knowledge. To understand practice research in this area better, I shall examine current changes in the conditions for knowledge production in social work and its interplay with professionalism.

The traditional understanding of professions has been increasingly challenged in the last two to three decades (Evetts 2003; 2006; Gleeson & Knights 2006; Pfadenhauer 2006; Quicke 2000) This is most clearly reflected in interplay with changes in the welfare state, but it can also be seen in wider societal developments. Changes in the institutionalization of knowledge production have been less emphasized.

If we examine social work, we can see that knowledge is formed by different social processes (Philp 1979). Politics in the welfare state as well as common norms and ways to justify decisions in the modern society, form a framework for practice in social work. From this perspective, knowledge production at universities, in educational settings and in social work practice (as well as in practice research) is only part of the broader societal processes that form and reform social work.

In the traditional conceptualization of professionalism, knowledge is one of the core elements in most understandings of professions. Evetts, for example, regards 'profession as a generic group of occupations based on knowledge both technical and tacit' (Evetts 2003).

At the same time, though, professionalism is very intimately connected to the societal institutionalization and regulation of knowledge (and power). The Parsons-based school has identified professionalism as a normative value system in which professionals are seen as playing an important stabilizing role in society. In contrast, the Weber-inspired<sup>16</sup> understanding of professionalism regards it as an ideology that emphasizes self-interest, status and income (Evetts 2003; Hjort 2005). It has primarily been in writings from the Parsons-based school that the oft-mentioned characteristics of professional groups has been developed. It has been argued

that professional work required a long and expensive education and training in order to acquire the necessary knowledge and expertise; professionals were autonomous and performed a public service; were guided in their decision-making by a professional ethic or code of conduct; they were in special relations of trust with clients as well as with managers/employers, and were altruistic and motivated by universalistic values. (Evetts 2006)

The traditional (universal) welfare state and its organization has often been seen as an important framework for social work because it provides the subject of focus – the social problems, beneficiaries, means-based solutions (involving values and norms) to develop criteria of deservingness, and so on. Considering the welfare state in light of professional groups and knowledge production, another perspective becomes important. The specific organizational setting of the (traditional) welfare state can be described as a combination of bureaucracies and professions (Clarke & Newmann 1997; Freidson 2001). This specific organizational setting might be so common that it is (still) regarded as orthodox, and it forms the basis for how professionalism is understood. Co-existing bureaucratic and professional ‘jurisdictions’ and ways of doing things have properly always been competing (in this setting), but they also complement each other. Bureaucrats must accept at least a minimum of professional autonomy if the decisions made are to be seen as legitimately knowledge based or informed. Professionals, in turn, must accept at least a minimum of bureaucratic regulation if the decisions made are to be legal (Weber 1982).

Changes in professionalism are reflected in a wider societal context. It has been argued that professions have increasingly encountered problems with trust and legitimacy because of the loss of both cognitive and normative superiority in postmodern societies characterized by individualization and pluralization (Pfadenhauer 2006). The system and the client have lost confidence in the ‘mono-occupational functional system’ (Pfadenhauer 2006), and individualization and pluralization (which underlie the loss of universal truth in modernism) do not leave room for shared normative grounds.

An example of how ‘shared normative grounds’ have been lost in the Danish universal welfare state can perhaps be found as early as discussions in the 1980s about living conditions. We saw a movement away from seeking good living conditions for all to arguments for differential living conditions, determined according to different life-modes, and later, according to different individual lifestyles.<sup>17</sup> The loss of the cognitive and normative superiority of professions is illustrated by both politically oriented and research-oriented criticisms of social work. However, it is very difficult to separate various types of criticism from political agendas aimed at reforming the welfare state.

The relationship between changing views of professions and changes in the welfare states can also be illustrated by New Public Management and movements towards the management-oriented regime (Clarke & Newmann 1997), post-bureaucratic organizations (Svensson 2006), and the audit society (Costea & Crump 2008; Gleeson & Knights 2006) or neoliberal society (Sewpaul & Hölscher 2004).

In the last two decades, the Nordic welfare states (or societies) have been described as being significantly influenced by New Public Management.<sup>18</sup> In the public sector, well-known keywords such as privatization, (semi-)marketization, competition, output orientation, economic incentives as core regulation, contracting, low trust, professional leadership and free choice (as well as different models for governing

contracts aimed at securing quality control)<sup>19</sup> have become orthodox, and they have collectively changed the 'logic' of the bureaucratic–professional regime seen hitherto.

In Nordic Welfare societies, the change in social work seems much more related to changes in the institutional framework for the regulation and processing of knowledge, services, and service providers (and receivers) than to changes in different policy areas.<sup>20</sup> Rather than change through traditional socio-political discussions, changes in the welfare states have taken place through depoliticized changes in discourses and regulations inside the public sector. Social work, as well as knowledge production in practical social work, is now being shaped in dramatically different political and institutional settings. The challenge facing professionals is profound.

As a result of changes in the public sector in the last few decades, the changes in professionalism have often been regarded as a kind of 'deprofessionalization', or even the dissolution of professions (Clarke & Newmann 1997; Svensson 2006).

We use the term deprofessionalization to refer, first, to the fragmentation and routinization of social work and the concomitant loss of opportunities for exercise of creativity, reflexivity and discretion in the direct practice. (Healy & Meagher 2004)

Deprofessionalization is also understood here to be comprehensive – not only are less qualified staff being hired to do social work but also highly qualified professionals are working in positions where their knowledge and abilities are largely underutilized. Deprofessionalization also involves fragmentation, insecurity and uncertainty, as one's autonomy decreases and the demands for accountability increase (Gleeson & Knights 2006). Indeed, demands for accountability have replaced the trust people once gave to professionals. Examples of eroding autonomy under deprofessionalization include having to use set criteria for outputs rather than professional judgement, the standardization of decision-making, the use of 'global' procedures and regulations to guide work, and the implementation of evidence-based concepts that must be followed very closely.

In Denmark, professions have not only new organizational forms and partners but also new discourses and types of apparently non-political demands to contend with: output measures, demands for declarations or fully developed concepts for social work interventions (e.g. MST), demands to follow different kinds of procedures, and so on. Often, these demands are instituted under the guise of quality management,<sup>21</sup> and mandatory, bureaucratically decided methods in different areas of social work must be followed. Such demands, which contradict traditional political government, indirectly (but nevertheless, quite effectively) set norms for what constitutes valuable knowledge and interventions in social work. They also promote (sometimes as unintended consequences<sup>22</sup>) a development towards specific types of knowledge.

Parton reflects on these type of processes in relation to their impact on the

knowledge in use. On the basis of the increasing influence of new information and communication technologies in British social work, he describes a change, where narrative-based ways of thinking and operating are replaced by data-based ways of thinking and operating.

... social workers are becoming, primarily, information processors. Not only can 'the subject' of social work knowledge be seen as being in the process of transformation into a series of discrete categories but also the 'social' nature of the work is disappearing. (Parton 2008)

Parton's description seems recognizable in the Nordic context as well, because the demands for knowledge (or data to monitor social work) have increased dramatically, and the time spent in client contact has decreased to a minimum. The types of 'information' or 'data' collected in Nordic social work are, to a large extent, the same in nature as those described by Parton. They are the data that are readily processed in information and communication technologies, such as discrete dates and other indicators needed for outputs, service standards, etc.

In a more comprehensive public sector context, professional regulation in social work can be seen as being (partly) replaced by managerial regulation. The goals, framework, loyalty and identity of social work change from being derived by the profession to being mandated by (specific) management-driven private or public units, which are in competition with each other (Clarke & Newmann 1997) This can be seen as the unmaking of the profession.

This totally changed environment for social work professionals may change to a degree, where there is no empirical evidence to support the traditional conception of social work professionalism. Professionalism, however, may already have turned into something else. Paradoxically (but perhaps in line with increasing managerial regulation), it can be shown that since about the mid 1990s, the concept of professionalism has become attractive for different vocational groups as well as for some 'social systems' and states (Evetts 2003; Hanlon 1998). A new discourse about professionalism seems to have emerged, one in which professionalism is constructed more from 'above' or from outside the profession. In this discourse, professionalism is defined in company mission statements, recruitment campaigns, policy procedures and manuals, and in market slogans appealing to customers – or more generally speaking, 'as discourses of occupational change and social control' (Evetts 2003; 2006) Professionalism is used here, in line with the Parsons school, to reflect positive values, including trust. The autonomy of the profession at an organizational level,<sup>24</sup> though, is not implied in this discourse.

In a knowledge production context, the insight that social work practice tends to become fragmented, routinized, and insecure, with knowledge tending to be more informational rather than creative, is important. However, the most important insight may be that the knowledge process in social work is increasingly governed

from outside in ways that do not seem to support quality social work in the eyes of the profession. On the contrary, a picture of ever-worsening social work performed under ever-worsening conditions is emerging. This dark situation becomes still bleaker if we take a broader societal perspective and see that client confidence in the professions has been lost.

The dominant perspective on knowledge in the discussion of change in professionalism has been that of traditional professionalism. The cognitive- and expertise-oriented aspects of professionalism have been underdeveloped in this discussion. In other contexts, researchers have suggested that we need to change our understanding of expertise (Karvinen-Niinikoski 2005; Schön 2001). A new formulation of this aspect of professionalism, from the inside, may address some of the needs of the present situation.

In the following section, I shall try to sketch the changing understanding of expertise, which has been proposed elsewhere.

### **Knowledge production: Combining different perspectives**

If we examine trends in knowledge production, at least two interconnected developments seem to characterize the current situation.

- The change in the role of the profession suggests a weaker *link* to the education of professionals and to (independent) scientific research in the area of the profession, and consequently, to the strengthening of bureaucratic and market-based knowledge production.
- Governmental changes in the types and forms of knowledge required to do social work change the form of knowledge production in practical social work – for example, management or ‘systems’ demands for the gathering of certain types of information, or their instructions for categories to use or procedures to follow, or restrictions on access to (and analysis of) information from models in other disciplines or professions – in short, the more governed knowledge or information handling is in the social work practice, the more likely it is that the types of knowledge/information the social workers gather will change.<sup>25</sup> This change, along with new methods, procedures and categories of service users, etc., will likely also affect social workers’ ‘ways of thinking’ and handling knowledge/information.

With respect to the change in the role of the profession, we have already seen that social workers have previously relied heavily on scientific research (depending on how closely we believe professionalism is connected to the logic of Mode 1 knowledge production, which was important in the historic forming of the

professions). Svensson suggests the strongest possible connection between Mode 1 logic and professional knowledge.

Professional knowledge is usually regarded as formal possession of credentials in a certain discipline not connected with practice or qualification at work. (Svensson 2006)

Parallel to newer discussions of expertise, he contrasts assertive knowledge (declarative knowledge, knowing what) with tacit knowledge, which is identified as the ability to recognize, to judge, to assess or to see patterns, and categorized as experimental knowledge (Svensson 2006).

Philp characterizes social work knowledge in the following way.

One can characterise social work as straddling a split between internal subjective states, such as pain, want, suffering, love and hate, and objective characteristics, in that they are awarded statuses, such as old age, crime, debt, handicap, illness and madness. The knowledge produced under social work's regime of truth is one which describes a process whereby these individual states and objective statuses are transformed into a social subject. A subject marked by his capacities for self-determination, responsible citizenship, and general sociability. .... Social work knowledge, then, produces an individual whom we can regard as a subject because he does not have any overpowering objective or narcissistic characteristics. Social work knowledge attempts to demonstrate potential sociability.(Philp 1979)

This is exemplified in the following.

The social worker does not say that the vandal did what he wanted to, for in doing so, the role of the social worker would disappear. What he does, rather, is to allude to the underlying character, the hidden depths, the essential good, the authentic and the unalienated. (Philp 1979)

From this point of view, there is (in principle) no problem in the ongoing process of gathering information, which characterizes the objective status from 'outside', but there may be obstacles to gathering knowledge about the subjective and its transformation to sociability. In fact, the objective status does not qualify as social work knowledge. We can see, then, a possible loss in social work knowledge. It is the loss of a form of knowledge that cannot be compensated by traditional research or the knowledge or information that is processed by management layers in the social work organizations.<sup>26</sup>

If the 'knowledge aspect' of professionalism is emphasized, it seems that social work has never been comfortable with the traditional understanding (and institutionalization) of professionalism. To some degree, of course, this is also

the case for other professions (Schön 2001). In social work, it is possible to obtain assertive knowledge about objective statuses, and bases for, and types of, transformation processes; but it does not seem possible to standardize meaningfully or to generalize the recognition processes and assessments that must be performed to distinguish between objective statuses and individual states. Formalizing all processes would imply a dramatic increase in the specificity of objective statuses and possible means for transformation, and it would reduce the citizen to a dysfunctional 'social machine', a picture that does not seem compatible with the social subject as a self-responsible (social) individual. If plurality and individuality have gained in importance, it could be argued that objective statuses must be held in more 'general' or 'abstract' categories, and means of transformation must be more varied and individually chosen.

If social work has been only partly (or poorly) served by traditional Mode 1 and profession-based knowledge, then more than just another type of research (Mode 2) is needed. We need research on objective statuses and individual states as well as new knowledge about various means of transformation that may be applicable in specific types of cases.

## **Conclusion**

There is strong evidence that knowledge production in social work, in practice as well as in the scientific fields, has changed in several dimensions in the last two to three decades (in the Nordic countries, perhaps mostly in the last decade). The knowledge society (as well as the rise of late-modern, postmodern, and neoliberal societies) has been marked by new ways to produce, to govern, to qualify and to use knowledge, as well as widespread questioning of hitherto high-status expert knowledge, and in consequence the professions have been similarly affected..

At the same time, traditional universal welfare states, which (through bureaucratic professional regimes) have relied on the traditional institutionalization of knowledge production, have especially been transformed in this area. Trends in new types of institutionalization appear to have dismantled the traditional understanding of professions. More plainly speaking, one could say that the professions are no longer seen to have important knowledge about their clients, who, in turn, are now to be regarded as citizens who can speak and make decisions for themselves. Professions<sup>27</sup> have also become weaker in their claim to have the best knowledge about the fields in which they work. Managerial, administrative and bureaucratic systems, which formerly were regarded as 'interfering' with core processes in the production of knowledge and the practice of social work, now hold sway.

In part, changes in the public sector can be seen as responsible for the critical attitudes towards expertise in late-modern or postmodern society. More generally,

changes in the public sector, which are undoubtedly based on chosen ideas of government, governance and management (and which properly will be changed in the following decades), will necessarily be seen as providing new answers to deeper societal changes. The situation seems to rule out a defense of the traditional core criteria of professions (expert knowledge based on education and traditional research) as realistic criteria for future social work.

Practice research can be regarded as one of the new(er) possible answers to create (a new) professionalism in social work. Despite changes in the public sector and the new relationship between social workers and those they serve, it seems unlikely that the central processes in social work (such as social transformation processes) have become superfluous. Practice research could, as suggested in the model described earlier, be a co-qualifying knowledge production process at the centre of social work expertise.

There are, however, several challenges in conducting practice research. It can be seen as having little status in scientific research fields. Conversely, it may be regarded as competing with the bureaucratic or managerial governing of knowledge production (or an activity that should be controlled by the bureaucracy). While it may be easier to follow the dominant institutional pathways, that may not be the most fruitful approach.

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## Notes

- 1 See also the translation: Åkerstrøm Andersen (2003) *Discursive analytical strategies – Understanding Foucault, Koselleck, Laclau, Luhmann*, Policy Press, Bristol.
- 2 The ‘epistemological turn’ referred to with a variety of concepts as ecological-, feminist-, poststructuralist-, or postmodernist perspectives, linguistic turn or constructivism (Peile & MCCouat, 1997).
- 3 For example, Bourdieu uses the expression ‘scholastic’ to criticize how concepts and categories are often developed from a non-practical or scholastic position but do not make sense in practical situations.
- 4 ‘In some behavioural sciences, including social work, finding the Holy Grail of scientific knowledge has led to disappointment. Universal truths about human conditions have not helped to solve individual problems but have become the ‘metanarrative of coercion’(Howe, 1994), a situation that is contrary to the essence of social work (Martinez-Brawley, 1999)
- 5 The traditional sociology of knowledge (Berger & Luckmann, 1971; Mannheim, 1968; Merton, 1968), and newer representatives, such as Bourdieu and Foucault.
- 6 See note 3 and, for example, (Dahl, Nilsson, & Sunesson, 1986; Nilsson & Sunesson, 1988; Olsson, 1993).
- 7 Referring to the role different institutions play in training social workers (in the different Nordic countries, this education may occur inside or outside the university). In this model, the political institutions are absent – they are discussed elsewhere.
- 8 Instead of seeing theory-driven, evidence-based knowledge as clearly distinguishable from practice, the constructivist position emphasizes theories as context based, expressing chosen perspectives on the research field (see for example Esmark, Bagge Laustsen & Åkerstrøm Andersen 2005a; Esmark, Bagge Laustsen & Åkerstrøm Andersen 2005b)
- 9 ‘Mode 1 cannot be accepted as an accurate characterization of the knowledge economy in the West since the sixteenth century’ (Pestre 2003)
- 10 Starbuck shows that the system of reviewing has major weaknesses. Empirical research shows that there tends to be little agreement when reviewers assess the quality of articles for publication in scientific journals.
- 11 The Nordic Campbell Center was established in 2002 (now named SFI-Campbell), and has received substantial governmental support, see ‘Evaluering af Nordisk Campbell Center’ (Evaluation of the Nordic Campbell Centre), juni 2007: 6
- 12 See, for example, programmes in the Nordic Campbell Center.
- 13 Bourdieu maintains that the natural sciences have the greatest prestige among the different disciplines or research areas.
- 14 Use of the traditional scientific positivistic ideal of science has been criticized heavily – for example, by Habermas, Bourdieu, Foucault, Luhmann, etc. – and can be seen as a very naive, unfruitful and insufficient position in social science.
- 15 From the perspective of evaluation research, it is a paradox, that the evidence-based

research, which is based upon the classical effect–evaluation model, can be ‘re-established’, without having solved any of the severe problems, this model has been criticised for. Among these, the ‘black-box’ problem can be mentioned (e.g.(Krogstrup, 2003)

- 16 M. S. Larson’s *The rise of professionalism* (1977, Berkeley: University of California Press), and A. Abbot’s *The system of professions: An essay on the division of expert labour* (1988, Chicago: University of Chicago Press) are seen as main contributions.
- 17 Thomas Højrup’s theory about life-modes became an opportunity to discuss the extent to which needs (and norms and values) are common (Højrup, 1983). See also Rasmussen, 2002).
- 18 Changes in the public sector have, in different frameworks, been described by several scholars, e.g. (Ansbøl, 2008; Busch, 2007; Greve & Ejersbo, 2008; Mouritsen, 1997)
- 19 This has been a common ‘instrument’ for some years, which also implies a certain way of looking at, and handling, organizations, e.g. EFQM, CAF, KVIK, <http://www.fm.dk/Arbejdsomraader/Offentlig%20modernisering/Kvalitet%20og%20styring/Styring%20af%20statslige%20institutioner.aspx> (051009)
- 20 In contrast to the UK, for example, where the Thatcher Government highly politicized the welfare state and the public sector, changes in the Nordic Welfare States could be described as depoliticized.
- 21 For example, Dahler-Larsen has described the mechanisms of qualitative management as implying typification, interpolation, temporalization, quantification, etc. (Dahler-Larsen, 2008)
- 22 Control, for example, in the form of output measures (which always measure what it is possible to measure instead of what the original idea was) has the well-known tendency to replace the original idea or goal, and further to neglect initiatives as well as knowledge about what cannot be measured.
- 23 In the Danish Association of Social Workers, there is a current discussion of the bureaucratization of social work, because increasingly large parts of the work they do are for administrative purposes. For example, in social work dealing with child care, only 14% of the social workers’ time is spent in contact with clients (<http://www.socialrdg.dk/index.dsp?page=8844>) d. 21-11-08.
- 24 The discourses can imply a disciplinary mechanism, where discourse of professionalism is used as an appealing way to govern ‘professional conduct at a distance’ (Fournier 1999, cited in Evetts 2006).
- 25 It is not possible just to handle new information demands in addition to previous practice demands.
- 26 It can be discussed, whether some of the bases for Philp’s understanding of social work knowledge are changed. It is evident that new demands are being made of the client in the transformation to sociability (e.g., to take responsibility for his/her own change and changeability), and this might involve decreased demands on the social worker’s knowledge about the subjective individual. For example, Åkerstrøm Andersen (2004; 2006) has identified one of the new ‘techniques’ in social work, the

'social contract'. The 'social contract' is made between the public authorities and the 'client' regarding the client's hitherto private sphere, and it determines how he or she needs to change or develop.

27 Professions here include scientific social work.