

## Guest editorial

This is the first of two special issues of this journal with the theme *Practice research in Nordic Social work: Knowledge production in transition*. Authors are all from the Nordic countries, and their particular framework comes from the context in which they work. However, the discourse on practice-based research is global, and scholars and practitioners from other countries will be familiar with many of the issues raised here, and will, we are sure, be interested to compare the Nordic experience with their own.

The concept of 'Practice research' may serve as a rhetorical message containing intentions of furthering research different from that which is not practice-based. This polarization may well illustrate the difficulties in defining both ends of the scale – that which is, at one end, research-led and far from practical focus, and at the other the realm of the researching practitioner in her own field and her own work. In discussing the practice research framework we bring forth different conceptions and ways of producing knowledge in social work in relation to practice research.

'Knowledge production' may be a way of reinterpreting the idea of science-based practice, and we have chosen this term partly because 'knowledging' may be understood as a verb rather than using the noun 'knowledge'. The authors agree upon an epistemological position where knowledge is understood as based upon the acceptance of different positions as legitimate in understanding knowledge. The client may well be an expert in his/her own field, as much as the social worker or professional may be said to master their work. Knowledge is always positional, and may be conceived as true or valid from one position, but wrong or invalid from another. This situational validation of knowledge refers to knowledge making as social processes of negotiation, especially applied to a field like social work. Social work may be identified as a field where different actors tend to negotiate about what is valid and/or what distinctions should be granted as valid capital within the social field in which they operate or move. This positioning may open a space for democracy – and visible power, in knowledge making.

The opposite position assumes that scientific knowledge operates with truth claims which may not be opposed by those who are unqualified to criticize the holders of power in the field of knowledge making. The latter kind of truth may adopt and use the noun 'truth', not regarding this as a process of claiming validity and relevance in different life worlds. 'Knowledge making in transition' thus positions this enterprise as a contribution to the ongoing discourse on valid knowledge in the field of social work. A competing position may be nourished on the concept of evidence-based practice. There is, however, not *necessarily* a dichotomy between the concepts of practice research and research-based practice on the one hand, and evidence-based practice and research on the other. It is in the positioning of these concepts within the discourse that the differences, even dichotomous ones, may evolve.

Another question about knowledge making, and how truth claims evolve around

certain phenomena, is raised by the role and methods of research and researching. Good research may challenge what we (from different positions) hold as truths and may expose as myths those assumptions about the world that were our guidelines to understanding and performing in practice as well as research. The ongoing discourse on social work and science tend to alternate between a reflexive position and a new positivism – the latter position often advance on the basis of an extremely limited understanding of such concepts as evidence-based research and practice. We do not favour any of these positions since the choice of the method to be used must be dependent on what questions we ask, and some questions are best answered by combining different perspectives.

As will be elaborate further throughout the papers in these issues, epistemology may be important in this discourse, but what is the relation between social work and science – especially social science? This is not necessarily about epistemology, but about power within the academic world versus power in a social political practice field. We begin by situating social work in relation to social science and develop a line of arguments to defend a position for social work both in academy and in public and private practices. The dichotomy of practice and theory or practice field and academy has to be transcended in order to develop new knowledge structures and learning organizations. We defend a position where researchers work in and with practice and where practitioners work in and with research and academy – where teaching and practice is intertwined.

This is also a practice where the voice of the user or the citizen using services comes through – as a part of the empirical setting of the practice/research field. The recent policy of including citizens as users in the evaluation and development of services is discussed, as well as the implications of a practice focused knowledge construction in the social field. Developing practice research is a process that includes different standpoints, as well as different actors within universities, work organisations, municipalities, and new innovative fora. This dialogue is also inherent in the making of this project as it had been developed through discussions among the group.

The authors rely on experience from developing and managing research projects and infrastructure in the Nordic countries, and they are all active in the international drive for new knowledge production in social work. The project contributes to a wider discourse in social work and social work research but also to a global discourse on reflexive and critical knowledge production as well as evidence based practices.

The material brought together here is aimed at academics, students, practitioners, managers and those interested in social work in practice and research. It is a response to the need for a more thorough discussion on practice related research and to present and critically discuss new experiences in knowledge production collaboration between academy, practice and management.

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