**Abstract ESWRA September 2016.**

**Theme: Challenges in social work research – conflicts, barriers and possibilities in relation to social work.**

**Subtheme 6: Research on different forms of partnerships/cooperation – including power and conflicts in social work.**

**The construction of empowering approaches within a workfare paradigm.**

* Is it possible to construct empowering approaches as a process where the citizens have influence over social efforts and thereby take ownership on his way to jobs or training?
* What kind of partnerships and /or conflicts might be embedded in these constructions?
* Which kind of professional training and cooperation are helpful in these processes?

When a part of the government defines empowerment as a process where the citizen has influence over social efforts and thereby take ownership on his way to jobs or training. ” (STAR projektbeskrivelse, 2014: 1 – in my translation) it is interesting to research how the initiatives are developed and fulfilled in social work practice in a JobCenter.

This way of thinking and practicing social work puts new demands on the shoulders of professionals and citizens if partnerships (or conflicts) between them are supposed to be realized in the future. An interesting question to raise is thus:

How can professionals learn to communicate and work with empowerment in cooperations with the citizens and at the same time administrate cut backs and different forms of control? According to Caswell (2014), the mind-set currently central in social work is one where sanctions are the only way to teach citizens outside the workforce how to find and keep a job. Structural explanations for unemployment as well as initiatives not focusing on learning are unthinkable. Therefore, it is important to know – and to choose – how these lines of thoughts and strategies are attached to the concept of empowerment in advanced welfare states and how practice research might be informed by empowerment.

It makes it relevant to make an examination of the understanding and use of empowerment in order to examine if empowerment still is a fruitful concept that breaks away from the dominant theory of knowledge in social work – or not. To create an empowering partnership between citizens and professionals there is a need to find ways to overcome different kinds of complexities and dilemmas in social work within the forms of practice research. And it is urgent to deal with the production of power in professional/citizen relationships and to discuss, negotiate and choose the most important problems to be addressed in a practice research process. In other words: making power relations visible and negotiable. Using citizens’ perspectives and the democratic principles of New Public Governance could strengthen empowerment processes and encourage new ideas to qualify and develop practice research.

This presentation will address some of the empowering processes due to a two year observation study at a Jobcenter developing empowerment as a strategy to bring the citizens closer to employment or closer to work and education.

I will discuss the interpretations of empowerment, the professional strategies of empowering interventions and the development of partnerships and collaborations in the Jobcenter. One of the core themes is a discussion about professional learning in a daily social work praxis dominated by cross pressures.