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**‘Social Skills’: Following a travelling concept from American academic discourse to contemporary Danish welfare institutions**

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**Abstract**

The article traces the origin and development of the concept of social skills in first and foremost American academic discourse. As soon as the concept of social skills was coined, the concern for people lacking such skills started and has been on the increase ever since (now sharing public attention with related concepts such as self-control, emotional intelligence and empathy). After the analysis of the academic history of the concept follows an examination of the implementation of a range of assessment instruments and training programmes related to social skills (and lack hereof) in contemporary Danish welfare institutions (more specifically day nurseries and schools, employment and penal services). The analysis forwarded in the article thus demonstrates how an intellectual idea may develop and travel - and on its journey connect to pre-existing cultural logics and societal concerns. The idea of social skills has through its development been made uncontroversial – everybody wants to be skilful. The concept does, however, convey an individualistic view on social life and imposes a reflexivity over own performance on the participants. Further, its normative character contributes to a problematization of those who are perceived to lack these skills.

**Key words**

Social skills, travelling concepts, travelling theories, construction of social problems, Scandinavian welfare institutions, genealogy, behaviourism, self-governance

“*Anne’s Private Day Nursery – Available Places. Centrally located semi-detached house with a big and closed garden. Easy access by bus and approach roads. I put emphasis on a calm and steady everyday life, where the children are in the centre. I focus on development of competences through play and on social skills.*”

This homemade flyer was hanging on a notice board close to the campus. Its usage of the term “social skills” (in Danish “sociale færdigheder”) drew our attention. We have noticed this notion in a great number of quite disparate Danish contexts; in kindergartens, schools, work life and prisons as well as in self-help literature, often linked to the assumption that lacking social skills may cause different problems, ranging from bullying and violence to loneliness and unemployment. We have also noticed the efforts put into teaching social skills in diverse programmes, ranging from the *Step-by-step* programme for preschool children to *Anger Management* courses for offenders. Anne’s flyer illustrates that the notion has spread beyond expert discourse and even become a lay term - and also that the preoccupation with social skills has reached Danish toddlers.

This article inscribes itself in the tradition of sociology of knowledge in that it aims to analyse where a particular concept - social skills - came from and which route it followed before reaching this Danish notice board and a great number of other Danish contexts. The term is a combination of two pre-existing words in daily language. The combination of them, however, gives the concept a metaphoric status, as the term skills that usually describes manual abilities is transferred to the more abstract context of social interaction. As Maasen & Weingart (2000: 104) state: “(…) a metaphor serves to redescribe a phenomenon, as yet problematic or unknown, in an illustrative and convincing way”. This article asks the following questions about the history of the concept: *What different contents have been given to the notion of social skills in scientific texts; which themes has it been related to, and which theoretical paradigms have influenced the understanding(s) of the notion?*

Building on the answers given to these questions, the article then describes the reception on Danish soil, answering the following questions: *How has the notion of social skills been transformed to a societal and political concern and taken up in three distinct social fields in contemporary Denmark (in policies for day nurseries and schools, for employment and for penal services)? How has it found fertile ground, and aligned or converged with pre-existing logics in these fields?*

**Theoretical approaches and methodology**

Our theoretical framework is composite, reflecting that while this research topic belongs to the sociology of knowledge, it also draws on both cultural sociology and the sociology of social problems. Foucault is, however, a companion for us through these different fields. Our approach is primarily inspired by two theoretical strands within the sociology of knowledge: *The first* is Foucault’s genealogy, which can be characterized as a historiographical uncovering of the emergence and stabilization of ideas that are later taken for granted (Foucault 1991). We have sought to understand how the idea of social skills has gained its current status, and which content that has been given to the notion in different periods - with sensitivity to discontinuities, competing understandings as well as marginalization of alternative understandings.

It is also within a Foucauldian framework we will interpret classification schemes, assessment instruments and training programmes related to social skills as a *dispositif.* They are technologies powered by science and applied on human beings either by themselves or by others, with the production of subjectivities as the outcome. Foucault (1984) pointed to a historical change in emphasis from external discipline to self-governance. According to Rose (1998) the “psy-sciences” (psychology, psychiatry, psychotherapy) have a deep influence on how people understand themselves and their relations to others today. These sciences are accompanied by neoliberal political discourses emphasizing personal responsibility, choice and autonomy, matching today’s labour market demands. We will regard social skills as a *dispositif* linked to neoliberal social demands. Such demands to the personality seem to represent a qualitatively new tendency in contemporary society: the emergence of a new interest in personal skills, traits and characteristic (Jensen & Prieur 2016), which implies a new responsabilization of individuals for their personal “fitness” in a social context.

*Secondly* we are inspired by literature on *travelling theories* (Said 1983; Clifford 1989; Bourdieu & Wacquant 1999), *travelling concepts* (Bal 2002; Knapp 2005; Frank 2009; Neumann & Nünning 2012) and *metaphors* (Masen & Weingart 2000). Grounded in feminism; in postcolonial theory, in cultural criticism and/or in Bourdieu’s sociology, this literature has sought to establish a critical reflexivity about conceptual transfer across disciplinary and geographical contexts. In Said’s (1983) seminal essay on the travel of Marxist theory he stressed that there are always conditions of acceptance as well as conditions of resistance to imported theoretical ideas. Theories can be understood as a response to specific social and historical circumstances (cf. Clifford 1989), and they might change in the ‘historical transfer [...] from one setting to another’ (Said 1983: 236). Theories or concepts are reframed when they travel, and *because* they are reframed, they are also translated and appropriated as they encounter pre-existing discursive and theoretical logics at their destinations – often in a way that Neumann & Nünning (2012: 5) refer to as *selective appropriations*.

The issue of transformation is brought to the fore in Bal’s (2002) work on travelling *concepts* (rather than theories). They are not merely words; rather they can be considered ‘shorthand theories’ (p. 23) or ‘miniature theories’ (pp. 22, 127). Single concepts might, however, be more flexible than the wider theory they are embedded in. Borrowing a term from Lévi-Strauss (1950), outside of the rigor of academic texts (perhaps even inside) concepts may be considered *floating signifiers* that can be given different content.

The literature on conceptual travel has problematized power differentials between exporter and importer as well as within importing contexts. Power differentials are pivotal toBourdieu & Wacquant’s (1999) critical analysis of exportation and importation of a series of theoretical ideas, often developed in an American context and then exported as commodities to qualitatively different social contexts. This recycling of American theoretical concepts constitutes a ‘cunning imperialist reason’, as it rests on universalization of particularisms linked to ‘a singular historical tradition’, although ‘misrecognized as such’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1999: 41). Bourdieu & Wacquant claim this exportation-importation relies on the existence of an international capitalist market of English language scholarly texts. As highlighted by Albert & Kleinman (2011), Bourdieu’s perspective on power imbalances within an international, scientific field of knowledge production is essential for understanding what is going on in a local context. While the concept of social skills undoubtedly is less controversial than the concepts Bourdieu & Wacquant studied (among others ‘multiculturalism’, ‘race’ and ‘underclass’), and while we will not claim we here witness an academic variety of cultural imperialism, the lesson we draw from Bourdieu & Wacquant is to investigate the powerful normativities a seemingly “innocent” concept such as social skills may rest on, and also that a distinction between context of production and context of reception is important to an analysis of conceptual travels.

Our work is also informed by Maasen & Weingarts’s (2000) analysis of knowledge dynamics. Such dynamics are not, as the positivists claim, just a story of (p. 7) “imperfect knowledge being superseded by more perfect knowledge”, but cannot be reduced to simple expressions of interests and power games either. Examining the transfer between science and other societal discourses, Maasen & Weingart identify metaphors as a unit of circulation. Metaphors are ‘nomadic’; they are taken up by and interact with various discourses (p. 3). Maasen & Weingart analyse how the meaning of some specific metaphors, acquired in a scientific universe, is transformed as the metaphors are captured by other societal discourses. For instance, the metaphor “struggle for existence” had its origins in everyday language, but was given a specific meaning in Darwin’s theory (p. 41). When transferred back into everyday language, new meanings were given to the metaphor as it was absorbed by different political discourses.

We are inspired by this literature on conceptual travels and knowledge dynamics, in particular how a concept travels from academic contexts to wider social contexts. Drawing on Bourdieu and Wacquant and on Conrad (2007) we also include the production of economic value from conceptual inventions.

Methodologically, our analysis below draws on a number of empirical sources. We have followed the steps recommended by Maasen & Weingart (2000: 39-40) quite closely: First, we have picked a concept and noticed its appearances. Second, we have sought to reconstruct a ‘discursive calendar’ with the aid of bibliometric methods. As the concept of social skills has originated in science - or at least gained its current status through associations with scientific knowledge - we have searched in the Web of Science (and will explain the relevant methodological choices as they appear). Third, we have examined how the concept arrived through academic discourse in a Danish context, and subsequently came to a “practical” use within different fields. We analyse the use of the concept within three particular contexts in contemporary Denmark, drawing on three separate empirical investigations, first and foremost of central policy documents (related to extensive fieldwork concerning the training of social skills within the chosen fields, but we will not draw on our observations and interview data here). Maasen & Weingart’s fourth step regards connecting local specificities to global significances, and we will in our concluding part seek to connect our findings to general, social trends.

**The Web of Science story about the making of a concern for social skills**

A search for literature using the term “social skill” (or “social skills”) up to the year 2014 brought 5 867 hits on April 10, 2015 in the Web of Science’s Social Sciences Citation Index (while the term “social competences” only gave 94 hits). All records had used the word combination in the titles, in the abstracts or as key words. Starting with a single record in 1964 and thereafter from 0 to 4 in the following decade, a sharp growth started in the mid 70’s with 20 records in 1976 (figure 1). While the figures kept between 43 and 77 per year in the 80’s, a new increase started in the 90’s: 93 hits in 1991, 180 in 2000, 429 in 2014. With the parallel increase in the number of journals, there would be an increase in records for almost any key word, but the rather marked shift indicates that something has occurred.

Of the 5867 hits 3362 have at least one author from an institution in the United States. Far behind come England and Canada with respectively 402 and 401 records. As we want to track the concept to Denmark, we note that Denmark has only 34 records, of which 24 are published within last 10 years. The strong American dominance reflects the American dominance within the area of psychology, to which the majority of hits belong: 3242 or 55 % of the records. Next come psychiatry, with 1113 or 19 %, and educational research with 1003 or 17 %, followed by rehabilitation and other medical fields (while simultaneous classification within different fields is possible, most records appertain to only one field).

The articles about social skills and schizophrenia are the most cited, followed by those related to other diagnoses (autism, depression, social phobia, ADHD, “mental retardation”, learning disabilities …). The most cited of all (with 1204 citations) deals with ADHD (Jensen et al. 1999). Ranking by authors, JL Matson is by far the one with most records: 169 in all. He is a well-publishing scholar, with over 700 publications, primarily about intellectual disabilities and autism spectrum disorders. In the author ranking he is followed by AS Bellack, FM Gresham, KT Mueser, RP Liberman and M Hersen with from 57 down to 43 records. Liberman is a professor in psychiatry; the five others are professors in psychology, all in the USA.

[Figure 1 in here]

**A behaviourist paradigm**

The first records using the concept social skills are quite disparate and seem unconnected. The first was entitled “A new method of charting social skills progress” (Gunzburg 1964) and published in *Mental Retardation*. It was followed by an article on reading as a social skill (in *Educational Leadership*, Shores 1965). In the following years most records dealt with other groups with particular problems: epileptic, developmentally handicapped, depressed, preschool blanket holders etc. The article on the depressed, published in *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* (Libet & Lewisohn 1973), is by far the most cited (238 citations). The abstract’s definition of social skills connects it to a behaviourist paradigm: “Social skill was defined as the complex ability both to emit behaviors that are positively reinforced and not to emit behaviors that are punished by others.” So what determines whether a person is considered skilful, is not characteristics of the behaviour or the person, but the ability to adapt to a given structure of positive and negative sanctions. Behaviourism is the dominating perspective on social skills in the 70’s.

From the mid-seventies on articles about people with diagnoses (autism, alcoholism etc.) became supplemented by articles about presumably healthy people, like police officers (Cooper & Bradshaw 1975) and managers (Graves 1976). The first of these receiving a high number of citations (326) was entitled “Coaching children in social skills for friendship making” (Oden & Asher 1977). It may mark a growing interest in undiagnosed people’s social skills, as other 1977 articles on children ( “playgroup toddlers” by Mueller & Brenner and “unassertive children” by Bornstein, Bellack & Hersen) also received a decent attention measured by citations (98 and 115 respectively). Bellack & Hersen are in the late 70’s involved in several articles published in a range of journals with the term “behaviour” in the name: *Behavior Therapy*, *Behaviour Research and Therapy, Behavior Modification, Behavioral Engineering* etc*.*

In 1982 the first of the 10 most cited articles appeared. It was written by McFall, published in *Behavioral Assessment* and entitled “A review and reformulation of the concept of social skills”. The author claims that while the initial interest for social skills came from behaviourally oriented researchers, the concept is at the time of writing used by researchers with much broader psychological and medical interests. Opposing both an understanding of social skills as personal attributes and an understanding of social skills as performance in a given situation, McFall introduces a more communication oriented paradigm, linking social skills to a process of decoding, deciding and encoding (drawing on Stuart Hall’s conceptualization - Hall 1980).

**Training and assessment**

The idea of social skills training and courses is introduced in 1976 in an article by Frederiksen et al. entitled “Social skills training to modify abusive verbal outbursts in adults”. This is also the first title that links social skills to management of aggression. In 1980 social skills is linked to the notion of “anger management” (Rahaim et al. 1980), and we will see that the topic of emotional control will later become very important. In 1977 the disadvantaged at the labour market were targeted for the first time (Shady & Kuc 1977), and in the following years social skills training for different kinds of offenders (sex offenders - Allen 1977, arsonists - Rice & Chaplin 1979, juvenile delinquents - Ollendick & Hersen 1979, etc.) entered the scene.

1982 was a year of quite a few books related to social skills. In a review of Ellis & Wittington: *A Guide to Social Skills Training* (published in London in 1981), the reviewer (Aszodi 1982: 302) refers to “a growing volume of literature on social skills training, ranging from the practical ‘do-it-yourself’ to the esoteric”. The same year no less than ten books are reviewed in different journals. The following titles give an idea about the range covered by them: *Teaching Social Skills to Children – Innovative Approaches* (Cartledge & Milburn 1980), *Social Skills in Interpersonal Communication* (Hargie et al. 1981), *Social Skills for Severely Retarded Adults – An Inventory and Training Program* (McClennen et al.1980) and *Social Skills and Work* (Argyle 1981). The existence of these books indicates that by the beginning of the eighties social skills training had become an established phenomenon in English-speaking countries.

Matson, the author with most publications on social skills, published in 1983 one of his more cited works (Matson et al. 1983), about a rating scale for social skills - “Matson Evaluation of Social Skills with Youngsters (MESSY)” - based on self-reports and teacher reports from children aged from 4 to 18. The items illustrate the normativity involved. An example of “appropriate social skill” is “I look at people when I talk to them”, while the following illustrate inappropriate behaviour: “I threaten people or act like a bully”, “I speak (break in) when someone else is speaking” or “I brag about myself”. Many of Matson’s later works employ the scale.

A leap to a 1997 article, published in a top-rated medical journal (JAMA), authored by Grossman et al. (1997) and entitled “Effectiveness of a violence prevention curriculum among children in elementary school”, illustrates where the idea of assessment and training programmes led. The curriculum tested is the *Second Step* programme with 30 lessons on anger management, impulse control and empathy. While parents’ and teachers’ reports did not show significant effects, observations of a random subsample of 588 students in classrooms, playground and cafeteria settings provided support for the abstract’s conclusion that the programme had led to “a moderate observed decrease in physically aggressive behavior and an increase in neutral and prosocial behavior in school.” This early, but actually quite weak, support for the efficacy of one of today’s most widespread social skills training programmes, has been cited 203 times.

Such scientific support helped training programmes in social skills to become commodities with an economic value (cf. Thomas-Peter 2006:33 on the marketing of particular correctional programmes), often quite costly and managed with strong copyright protection. As a parallel example, Kendall states that the idea of *cognitive skills* became “an industry with some psychologists even setting up their own private consulting firm to sell it” (2011: 71).

**A chain of value**

The concept social skills was coined in the 60’s and given content throughout the 70’s, thereby obtaining a relatively stabilized meaning. The idea that a phenomenon such as social skills exist is logically accompanied by a discovery of deficits: that some people may lack the same skills. As soon as the deficit understanding occurred with some regularity, a market for instruments for assessment and for repairing was established.

This is therefore also an example of how an intellectual idea can obtain value: first a symbolic value within academia through publication and the subsequent recognition by peers through citations as well as through the support such publications give for a university career. Thereafter the idea may, as pointed out by Bourdieu and Wacquant (1999), be exported and converted to economic value, in this case self-help books, training programmes, assessment tests etc. Quite a few people have thus got an intellectual, professional or economic interest in the expansion of a social skills deficit explanation: When new groups are seen to lack such skills, the need for expertise, books and instruments expands. As Kleinman & Osley-Thomas (2014) have shown, in the context of an analysis of the recent development of universities, the merging of intellectual properties and commercial interests has gained in legitimacy over the last decades, providing a perfect background for the commodification process we have sketched out here.

An example of the expansion of the deficit explanation is ADHD. Replacing earlier, rather similar diagnoses, the term Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder entered the diagnostic scheme (DSM-III) in 1987 with inattentiveness, hyperactivity and impulsivity as core symptoms. In 1991 the first article linking ADHD to a social skills deficit appeared (Landau & Moore 1991: 235): “When parents, teachers, and clinicians consider the fundamental characteristics of attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), or even when one examines the diagnostic criteria presented in the psychiatric taxonomy (i.e., DSM-III-R, American Psychiatric Association, 1987), not enough thought is given to the interpersonal problems that children with ADHD experience. In fact, only during the last decade have these children's social skill deficits been the focus of serious inquiry.” The authors thereafter refer to earlier works on peer relations of youngsters with hyperactivity, which they combine with more recent studies suggesting that experiences of interpersonal difficulties and peer rejection are frequent. This understanding of ADHD as implying a more relational problem stick to the diagnosis today, as for instance the assessment instruments typically used for children are questionnaires answered by relatives and other persons close to the child (teachers, coaches etc.) mainly dealing with the child’s social relations and conduct. Quite a few articles have linked social skills and ADHD in the decades after this first article (among them one of the most cited in our sample, Jensen et al. 1999). So the interaction with the social skills metaphor has changed the understanding of ADHD (cf. Maasen & Weingart 2002 on how metaphors work).

The expansion of the ADHD diagnosis to include new groups may be understood through Conrad’s (2007) concept of medicalization. Conrad defines medicalization as a process “by which nonmedical problems become defined and treated as medical problems” (p. 4). This occurs when a problem is defined in medical terms and/or treated with a medical intervention. Conrad regards the process as a collective action, where physicians are not the only influential actors. The pharmaceutical industry has played a key role in changing the view of certain states or traits, but laypeople may be active collaborators, too. As an example, in the case of ADHD the company producing the most common drugs used in treatment has provided financial assistance to the most important US support group for ADHD (p. 57). In the last decades there has been a steep increase in the number of people diagnosed with ADHD in many Western countries. It is our claim that the public attention ADHD has received is central to the growing concern for social skills deficits more generally.

**Towards a more relational understanding of social skills**

Parallel to the emergence of the economic chain discussed above, the understanding of social skills moved out of the behaviourist paradigm and into a more relational understanding, drawing on sociological or social psychological conceptions of human relations and interactions as entailing emotional and communicative aspects. A well cited article (269 citations) by Riggio in 1986, entitled “Assessment of basic social skills”, marks the break. Riggio points to an enormous variability of dimensions labelled social skills before advancing that it has to do with communication, naming the different forms of social skills as follows: emotional expressivity, emotional sensitivity, social expressivity,social sensitivity*,* the skill of emotional control and social control. Two years later Riggio et al. (1989) linked social skills and empathy, and the year after Riggio et al. (1990) linked social skills to self-esteem.

A few years later an influential article by Dunbar (1998) entitled “The Social Brain Hypothesis” appeared in *Evolutionary Anthropology*. He suggested the primates’ relatively big brains were linked to the development of capacities for tactical deception and coalition formation (which is why the hypothesis was originally called “the Machiavellian intelligence hypothesis”). Similar negative connotations to social skills became also explicit in two articles by Sutton et al. (1999a, b), the first entitled “Bullying and 'theory of mind': A critique of the 'social skills deficit' view of anti-social behavior” and suggesting that bullies need good social cognition and theory of mind skills in order to manipulate and organize others. Another article from the same year by Feldman et al. (1999), “Nonverbal deception abilities and adolescents' social competence: Adolescents with higher social skills are better liars,” also problematize the idealization of social skills. We find it striking that such more negatively connoted aspects of social skills almost drown between articles that take the positive value of social skills for granted. Applying Foucault’s framework the marginalization of alternative understandings of social skills, here understandings that see social skills as linked to manipulation or instrumental social practices, may be seen as part of the genealogy of the concept. Such understandings were discarded in favour of an understanding of social skills as *per se* desirable, explaining negative phenomena solely by *lack of* social skills. This points can be demonstrated in titles such as “Beyond social capital: How social skills can enhance entrepreneurs' success” (Baron & Markman 2000) or “Social skills deficits associated with depression” (Segrin 2000). The concept of social skills is thus *made uncontroversial*, which may be one of the keys to understanding the relative success of the concept.

**Summing up the Web of Science story: From concept to concern**

This analysis has shown that the concept of social skills became established within the behaviourist tradition, but was adopted and adapted by other traditions. While most studies have dealt with the problem of particular groups alleged to lack social skills, also supposedly ‘ordinary’ people have over the years become the object of attention. A couple of recent titles may show how the concern for social skills may today be used in an accentuation of more recent concerns, like those related to the new media: “Mobile voice communication and loneliness: Cell phone use and the social skills deficit hypothesis” (Jin & Park 2013), or “Attachment style, social skills, and Facebook use amongst adults” (Oldmeadow et al. 2013). Although slightly embittering the joy, the few studies with more negative or at least ambiguous understandings have been marginalized, thus leaving the concept with a status as a buzz word with purely positive connotations.

The term *social skills* is not, however, the only one celebrated today (cf. Figure 1). The term “self-control” is with 6115 hits within the same range as “social skills” and has also close to the same distribution over the years. The popularity of two other concepts seems, however, to express better the turn towards a relational and communicative understanding of human relations. Some authors had used the term *emotional intelligence* before David Goleman, but it became famous through his book entitled *Emotional intelligence* (1995). The term has 2484 hits in web of science; only three of them are from before 1995, and the highest number was in 2014 (325 hits). As for *social skills*, a certain market logic can also be observed concerning *emotional intelligence*; with a range of assessment instruments, training programmes, courses, suggestions of key-note speakers to be invited to business audiences etc. – all products emanating from the invention of a concept and now offered at a market, by different actors, most of them unrelated to the inventor.

The rising buzzword now seems to be *empathy*. The coining of the term is attributed to the British psychologist Edward Tichener as a translation of the German word *Einfühlung* (http://cultureofempathy.com/references/History.htm) in the beginning of the 20th century. Empathy has 9713 hits in Web of Science, starting in 1956, but as many as 1066 are from the year 2014, the double of what it was only six years earlier (517 in 2008). Assessment instruments and courses related to this concept are also offered.

Researchers may invent a concept and give it a content, which may develop and change over the years. The concept is received by other researchers, who may refer to the previous use of it, but may also transform it and use it for other purposes. The idea that something such as social skills existed, was followed by a concern for those who might lack them. This concern seems to have acted like a fuel, leading not only to more writings about the topic but also to the development of assessment instruments and training programmes, which besides their academic value also have economic value.

The success of the concept and of such instruments and programmes is, however, dependent on a receiving society. We will now turn from the site of creation to the site of arrival – from the development of concepts, understandings and suggested solutions to the applications of them in a concrete social context. The travel of the concept of social skills will be traced through its arrival in Danish academic literature to the subsequent spread to ordinary language. We will thereafter analyse how the concept has been adopted and adapted within three specific contemporary Danish welfare contexts: education, labour market and prisons. The claim will be that the success of the concept in these contexts is due to its ability to connect to existing social concerns and fit into a neoliberal and individualistic agenda.

**The introduction and reception of a concern for social skills on Danish soil**

The term *social skills* translates in Danish to either *sociale kompetencer* or *sociale færdigheder*. The first usage of this term we find is from 1984, when Irene H. Oestrich, professor in cognitive therapy, published an article about the training of children’s *sociale færdigheder* in *Scandinavian Journal of Behaviour Therapy*. So the very first arrival of the concept on Danish soil and translation to Danish language was related to the behaviourist understanding of social skills that had established the concept in English. Oestrich published new articles on the topic in the same journal in 1987 and 1992 and a self-help oriented book in 1986, where she in the title linked the training of *sociale færdigheder* to getting friends and obtaining influence. In 1988 another popularizing book on children’s development by Fasting, Michelsen & Sommer took its point of departure in a claim that requirements to children’s *sociale kompetencer* have increased. In the same line, Lars Dencik, professor in social psychology, argued in 1989 that postmodern society with high female labour market participation and day care facilities for most pre-school children implied a development of new social skills for children. Ten years later and in a more popularized text he argued that in a postmodern society the notion of children’s development of *sociale kompetencer* fits better than the established term socialization (Dencik 1999).

In the meantime, a family therapist Jesper Juul (1995) and a psychologist Dion Sommer (1996) had received considerable media attention with their introduction of a new vision of the child as “competent”; as a positive-minded, reasonable and cooperative social actor, a view that represents a break not only with a Freudian vision of children’s development as ridden by unconscious emotions, but also with a behaviourist understanding. 20 years later, Juul’s book, with a title that translates to *Your Competent Child* (published in English in 2001), still stands as a guide to Danish parents for how they should communicate with their children, where the ideal might be summed up as a supported form of self-governance (cf. Rose 1998).

In a parallel movement the concept of competences (*kompetencer*) had come to replace or be added to the earlier concept of qualifications (*kvalifikationer*) in human resource management. While qualifications were understood as fixed and specific, competences were seen as more flexible and individualised (Hermann 2008). Hermann argues that this shift was related to the dispersal of human resource management thinking, which values employees’ cooperative skills, responsibility and flexibility. So also within work life the emphasis on competences may be connected to the ideal of self-governing individuals.

While the concept entered Denmark through psychologists’ concerns for children, it subsequently gained support from an increased orientation towards competences within human resource management. And parallel to the appearance and gradually increased use of the concept in Danish academic and more popularized literature the concept also travelled to ordinary language and mass media where it became widespread. A search in the Danish national archive of newspaper articles, Infomedia (figure 2), revealed that the concept in recent years has appeared quite frequently in newspaper articles.

[Figure 2 here.]

The concept of social skills reached Danish governmental policy around the change of the millennium, and was rapidly put to use in a range of different areas. The government considered the amount of social skills vital for the overall competitiveness of the nation and initiated in 2001 a ‘National competence account’ (published by Ministry of Education 2005). Leading educational scientists contributed to its chapter on social competences. Here 60 % of the Danish population was estimated to have a ‘middle’ amount of social competences, whereas 24 % had a high amount and 16 % a low (p. 76). Social competences were argued to be founded in early childhood, and to have great impact on work life success (p. 44). It was also maintained that companies demanded ‘personal and social competences’ rather than ‘specific professional skills’ (p. 61). The story of this account illustrates well how governmental policies apply knowledge in today’s knowledge society (cf. Maasen & Weingart 2000): their legitimacy is actually founded in knowledge claims.

A key to the success of the term social skills might be its elasticity, as illustrated earlier in this article; different meanings have been given to the concept. The concept could be appropriated, employed, adapted and utilized in different ways depending on pre-existing logics in the fields where the concept arrived. This reflects Bal’s point (2002) that concepts might be quite flexible and therefore travel more easily than the theories within which they were originally coined. The concept’s metaphoric character and the fact that its genealogy had made it uncontroversial have undoubtedly also played a role in its successful arrival to new fields.

**Day nurseries and schools**

In 2004 national legislation made it mandatory for all pre-school facilities in Denmark to formulate a plan for children’s learning, and among the six specific areas to be covered was social skills. Gilliam and Gulløv (2012) have analysed the educational aims of child care professionals in day nurseries and schools in contemporary Denmark and found a strong emphasis on ‘making children social’. This sociability concerns the ability to respect personal boundaries; be emotionally balanced, oriented towards interaction with others and able to handle implicit codes of inclusion and exclusion. The gross majority of Danish children attend pre-school facilities and are thus subject to these efforts. In a survey we conducted among day nurseries for children from 3 to 6 years in the municipality of Aalborg they all confirmed working systematically with children’s social skills - 67 % of the nurseries by applying specific training programmes.

At the time the concept arrived, day nurseries in Denmark were influenced by a social pedagogical approach putting emphasis on the children’s free play, postponing school to the age of six (Borchorst 2000: 55). The term critical pedagogic was coined as an umbrella term for pedagogical approaches having in common the child centring and a critical approach to traditions (Kvale 2004: 33). The pedagogical field was furthermore heavily influenced by ideas about the emancipatory potential in letting children express themselves through free play, as well as the more recent ideas about children as basically competent individuals, which we touched upon above (Juul 1995, Sommer 1996). Contemporary pedagogical plans and practices, however, do not simply value children’s play in its own right, as playing has become more instrumentalized and supervised today. Children are taught to observe and evaluate themselves as players, for instance when three-year olds are invited to evaluate themselves as to how good play-mates they are.

A close cooperation between pre-school facilities and parents is established from the child’s entrance. It continues in school, managed through the annual or bi-annual so-called school-home-talks, where the pupil and his/her parents meet with the teachers and discuss not only the child’s academic progress but also relational issues, like friendships and cooperation, as stated in this quote from the association of pupils’ parents: ‘The good school-home-talk is realized when the pupil, the teachers and the parents in cooperation define the learning targets for the pupil: What should he or she learn in the next period both regarding the academic and social area?’ (Skole og Samfund 2004:2). The quotation shows the child centring; that social learning is considered just as important as academic learning, and that the pupil ideally should practice a supported self-governance.

At graduation from lower secondary school, usually at the age of 16, children’s suitability for further education is evaluated by their teachers. This evaluation does not solely concern academic performances, as one of the parameters of evaluation is social skills. The evaluation manual states (Ministry of Education 2010 p. 20): “Social skills and qualifications are decisive for the ability to function in modern society, also because the social competences, for young people, are important for formation of identity and learning.” These skills are furthermore linked to the ability to participate in a community: “This is in consideration for the experience of feeling committed to contributing to the task solving in a working community as well as to the upholding of a community.” Learning social skills is thus explicitly tied to labour market demands but also to social participation more broadly. The relational and communicative understanding of social skills seems to prevail over the behaviourist understandings within the educational field.

**(Un)employment policies**

The notion of social skills also fell on fertile ground in the Danish field of (un)employment, as state policies consider the possession of social skills central to the employability of individuals. Unemployed people and welfare recipients will often have their social skills assessed as part of an evaluation of their employability. Programmes for making the unemployed employable quite often explicitly aim at inducing social skills. For instance, a course offered by the municipality of Randers in social skills is designed for ‘people whose [lack of] social skills creates problems for their attachment to the labour market’. The homepage and course folder mention that participants should be prepared to participate in psychological and practical exercises, including social group work and cognitive training (Center for Beskæftigelse og Rehabilitering, 2014). Another example is an official report evaluating projects for ‘people on the edge of the labour market’. One of the target groups was ‘people who lack social skills’, and an aim of the projects was to ‘develop the social and personal skills’ of the participants. The report reviewed a number of methods used for this purpose: individual and collective talks, field trips, cooperation exercises, cognitive therapy, internships etc. (Arbejdsmarkedsstyrelsen & Rambøll Management 2008). A screening of different unemployment projects across Denmark indicates that these examples are representative for the country.

The reason the Danish field of (un)employment has been so welcoming of the concept of social skills may be that the Danish labour market and unemployment policies have made a neoliberal move toward individualization, with focus more on imbuing individuals with (perceived) labour market value than on the earlier, more Keynesian attempts at stimulating the demand for labour. The Danish state is, however, not a minimal or passive state, so through path dependency a tradition of high levels of state intervention has persisted, but with a focus on shaping individuals who conform to post-industrial labour market demands. Among these demands is the ability to take part in networking and cooperation. The concept of social skills has aligned itself, perhaps even converged, with a workfare policy aiming at imbuing individuals with traits and characteristics perceived to be central to post-industrial labour market value, i.e. relational, emotional and communicative skills rather than, or as a supplement to, more traditional technical skills (Jensen & Prieur 2016). The understanding of social skills prevailing in Danish unemployment policies seems to draw partly on a relational and communicative understanding of social skills, and partly on a neo-behaviourist understanding, which is quite apparent in some of the skills-building projects.

**Penal services**

The concern for social skills in the Danish Penal services is apparent in the relatively widespread employment of different behavioural programmes offered in Danish prisons as well as by the Probation Services. The programme portfolio has expanded since the implementation of the Canadian forerunner programme *Cognitive Skills* in 1994. The programme developers were inspired by American studies of rehabilitation programmes from the 70’s (by Gendrau and Ross, cited in Ross et al.1988). Programme development was especially driven by practitioners and researchers in the Correctional Service Canada and the US Department of Justice (Shaw & Hannah-Moffat 2011:105). By the mid-nineties cognitive-behavioural programs were bought and implemented in the UK, New Zealand, Australia and Europe (op.cit. 106). *Cognitive Skills* has been supplemented with more specialized programmes such as *Anger Management,* which derived from the American programme *Aggression Replacement Training* (McGuire & Clark 2004) and was implemented in the Danish penal field in 2000 after first having been used by the British Prison and Probation Service. The theoretical foundation of the programmes is often only vaguely described (see for instance Ross et al.1988), but might be labelled cognitive behaviourism, as it combines social learning theory, cognitive therapy and behaviourism (cf. Kendall 2002:187).

In 2013 504 offenders went through the six different cognitive-behavioural programmes offered by the Danish penal services. With around 4000 people imprisoned and 8000 on probation/under surveillance this year (Annual Report 2013), this does not sound as a high number, but as most prisoners are imprisoned for too short sentences to engage in training programmes, the coverage is actually quite high.

A reason the penal field was so receptive to ideas about social skills education may be that rehabilitation has been a cornerstone of Danish penal policies. The rehabilitative aim of imprisonment was written into the penal code in 1930 (Balvig 2004), and given further political strength after WW2 with the ideal of social engineering. Crimes were primarily regarded as having social causes. Denmark has one of the world’s strongest welfarist profiles, which in the penal field translates to a low incarceration rate of 67 per 100,000 inhabitants and an emphasis on humane prison conditions (Smith 2012). The so-called punitive turn observed in other Western countries from the 70’s came to Denmark, too, but with less dramatic consequences than in for instance UK and the US. The rehabilitation ideal survived,but in a qualitatively changed version (cf. Andersson 2004 on current Swedish penal policy). Older penal welfarism was wed with new forms of rehabilitation, with the accent put on teaching self-control and accountability. The current rehabilitation scheme shares a neoclassic understanding of crime as a problem of a lack of discipline, social control and self-control (rather than having structural or social causes), which has been on the rise in US over the last decades (Garland, 2001). The Canadian *Cognitive skills* programme developers (Ross & Fabiano, 1985), for instance, claim that offenders are likely to be impulsive, egocentric, rigid in their views, and poor at problem-solving, perspective taking, and critical reasoning. In this way, the behavioural programmes may have helped to import from USA, Canada and UK the more individualistic vision of crime and offenders that followed the punitive turn to Denmark (cf. Balvig 2004), which would be an illustration of Bourdieu & Wacquant’s (1999) ‘imperialist reason’. These understandings are present in the manual for *Anger Management*, which maintains that structural factors make people *believe* their possibilities are limited, but the programme may help to restructure the participants´ thoughts (Sjöberg & Windfeldt 2008) and make them understand how to take more appropriate choices in their lives. Referring back to the genealogy of the social skills concept, it seems that it is first and foremost the (neo) behaviourist understanding that has been taken up by the Danish penal services.

**Conclusion and discussion**

The analysis has covered the development of the concern for social skills in academic texts from the 1960’s and onwards. The concept has been linked to different theoretical paradigms and thereby been given different meanings, ranging from a (neo) behaviourist to a more relational and communicative definition, all while it has been employed to understand both people who are defined as outside normality and the allegedly ‘normal’. Put short, through its academic history the concept has been attributed different (although not indefinite) meanings, and perhaps this adaptability of the concept – indeed its somewhat heuristic character – together with its metaphoric character goes a long way to explain its relative success (reflecting Bal’s 2002 point about concepts being more flexible than wider theories).

We have furthermore demonstrated the relatively successful adoption and adaptation of the concept on Danish soil, where it converged with specific social logics in three different contexts, aligning with different meanings of the concept. In the penal services it is most clearly the (neo) behaviourist understanding of the concept which prevails, whereas the deployment of the concept in day nurseries and schools is closer to a more relational and communicative understanding, with the unemployment area in a position in between. In all three fields, however, the success of the concept seems symptomatic of a more general turn towards individualization, towards finding explanations for an individual’s behaviour or problems in the individual itself rather than in its relations, its conditions or its structural position. In all three fields the concept is applied in a policy of self-governance: of making people who do not (yet) handle social demands for self-governance able to do so. The concept has, as Maasen & Weingart (2000: 149) stated about the journeys of the metaphors they studied, become attractive for new discourses and through these transfers become a *dispositif* in Foucault’s sense of the term. At the core of the concept and its popularity is a concern regarding individuals’ social behaviour. The concept does not only *fit with* this concern; it also *reproduces* and fuels it, and if Foucault and Rose are right, such processes work best when a governmental concern is made into a concern for oneself.

The culturally and socially constructed concern for social skills has thus aligned with neoliberal currents as they appear in a Scandinavian context, where individuals’ labour market value is a governmental concern. This connection between social skills and work life is highlighted by Pedersen in what he – borrowing a concept from Cerny (1990) - describes as the competition state. While the goal of the welfare state was to educate democratic citizens, the goal of the competition state is to create ‘soldiers in the competition of the nations’ (Pedersen 2011: 172). This alignment between an originally scholarly concept coined in US academic psychology of the 60’s and a current Danish labour market neoliberalization marks a rather puzzling and paradoxical yet temporary ending to the transatlantic journey of the concept of social skills.

It is somehow remarkable that all this has happened without any signs of resistance against the idea of the importance of social skills. According to Said (1983), there are always conditions of acceptance as well as conditions of resistance to imported theoretical ideas. Still, social skills seem to have been defined as so obviously desirable that it is impossible to oppose them. Who would say that it would *not* be a good idea to train children, police officers, delinquents, unemployed etc. in social skills?

It is, however, our claim that the concept does not represent a completely innocent framing of social life. The genealogy shows that the concept has *been made* uncontroversial in a process where potentially negative dimensions of social skills have been marginalized. After all it is, at least potentially, possible to argue that social skills are central to many rather unsympathetic, manipulating and instrumental social practices. Further, the concept conveys the idea that for social life to be good, the individuals involved should be skilful. Knowing the concept imposes reflexivity over one’s own “performances”, and thus a learning of a more instrumental attitude to social life.

Its normative character also contributes to a problematization and possibly also a marginalization of those who are perceived to suffer from a social skills deficit. As Conrad (2007: 148) puts it: “The great danger here is that transforming all difference into pathology diminishes our tolerance for and appreciation of the diversity of human life.” Forms of behaviour that were seen in the past as acceptable, or perhaps as undesirable but quite ordinary, may today, due to changes in outlook and categorization schemes, qualify for pedagogical/ psychological intervention or medical diagnosis. Impulsivity, restlessness and aggressiveness are examples of types of behaviour that at one time were considered as rather ordinary and not necessarily noteworthy (“boys will be boys”, as the saying went). Aggressiveness is still valued in some contexts (e.g. war and some sports), and impulsivity in some other contexts (e.g. art and music). But such contexts are exceptions. The ideal socially skilled human being of today appears to be disciplined and self-controlled, but still self-assertive, emphatic and communicative. The journey of the concept of social skills has here been used as a lens that has helped to highlight such normative changes in Western society.

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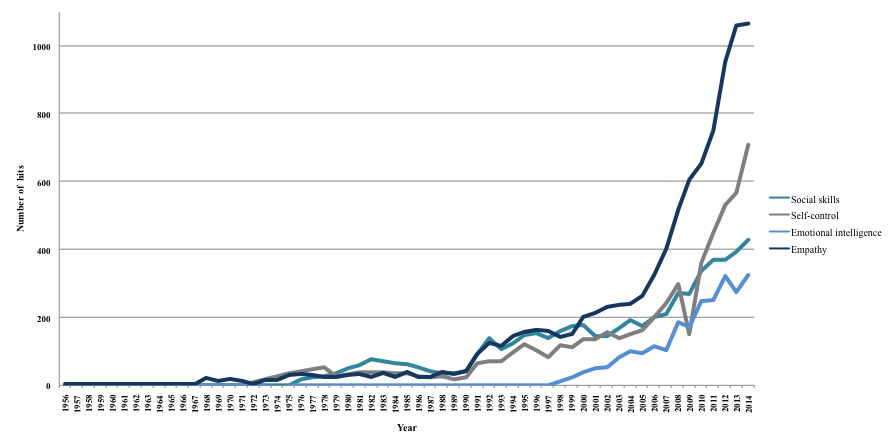
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Figure 1. Web of Science hits for “social skills”, “self-control”, “emotional intelligence” and “empathy”.



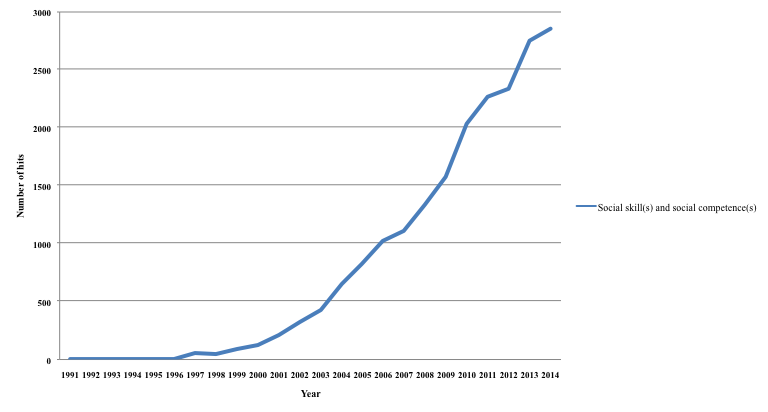


Figure 2. Hits in Danish newspapers (through the data basis Infomedia) on social skill(s) and social competence(s) (in Danish *sociale færdigheder, sociale kompetencer*).