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Sociological approaches as perspectives on and in social work

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ABSTRACT

Ethnomethodology, conversation analysis and actor-network-theory are taken as departing points for looking inside professional practice.
Sociology and social work are closely connected as regards origin, academic organisation and societal focus. At the same time, they are clearly distinguishable as separate disciplines. The contrasts between the two fields, despite the close relationship, are manifest, not least when they are taken as wholes. Many sociological concepts and theories have been preoccupied with describing and explaining the antecedent conditions of action and its multiple outcomes, whether intended or unintended. This has to some extent been the case in Danish social work research. There has been a period of 'tensions' between research on social work informed by this type of ('macro')sociological theories on the one hand and on the other hand social work practice. As argued by Boden (1994) much social theory emphasises structure "over" action, making the latter invisible in the shadow of the former, and making social work an 'invisible trade' (Pithouse 1987). A number of sociological approaches, however, emphasise (inter)action. Discourse and narrative approaches to social work, for instance, offer opportunities for looking inside professional practice (Hall & White 2005). More generally, approaches to social work research based on ethnomethodology, conversation analysis and actor-network-theory offers opportunities for a more close relationship between the two disciplines.
In this paper I will outline some of the major developments in Danish social work research, giving examples of interconnections rather than contradictions and tensions between the two disciplines. The paper consists of three sections. In the first section, I will describe selected trends in the development of Danish social work research. In the second section I will argue for the relevance of a relational approach to social work practice based on ethnomethodological, conversation analytical and actor-network-theoretical concepts. In the third section I will discuss the relevance and 'division of labour' between different (sociological) approaches and different perspectives in social work practice and research.
The paper is drawing, among others, on two research projects, published in:
- Eskelinen, L, S P Olesen & D Caswell (2008): Potentialer i social arbejde. Et konstruktivt blik på faglig praksis (Potentials of social work. A constructive look at professional practice). København: Hans Reitzels Forlag.
- Eskelinen, L. & S P Olesen (2010): Beskæftighelsesindsatsen og den virkninger set fra kontanthjælpsmodtagernes perspektiv (The employment effort and its effects seen from the perspective of cash benefit recipients). (www.akf.dk)

INTRODUCTION

On the one hand sociology and social work are two different fields. There are some advantages associated with this. Social work, for instance, applies different types of knowledge in practice (scientific as well as experience-based) and as a discipline it is closely connected with education and practice, whereas basic research and accumulation of generalised knowledge in some sense may appear as less important. Sociology is preoccupied with investigations and conceptualisations of social life in all its aspects and is, as an academic field without a specific practice relationship, free to be critical as regards the professional status of social work, as was the case in the 'classic' controversy over the professional status of social work initiated by Flexner in 1915 and 'repeated' in a way by the Danish sociologist Peter Gundelach, characterising in a keynote-address at the 3rd Nordic FORSA-conference in 1999 social work as an *ideoscape* (Gundelach 2000). Also sociological research is free to warn against romanticising social work (Järvinen 2002), or on the contrary against demonising it.

On the other hand sociology and social work has common origins (Deegan 1990; Soydan 1993; Levin & Trost 1996; Levin 2000; Levin2004). Although social work now has its own 'list of queens', drawing in its own way on philosophical and theoretical traditions (Pettersson 2001) it is of course more defined as an applied discipline or a field of practice than e.g. sociology. However, including social pedagogy, social work and other disciplines in social science could be seen as part of the same more general interest in social matters and even of the same endeavour to gain knowledge about society and to improve social life.

What seems important in this specific context is that differences inside the disciplines of sociology and social work regarding ontological, epistemological and methodological positions in some sense occur as bigger than between the disciplines as such. It may, accordingly, look easier to identify and move across the bridges, e.g.
- between critical theory and critical/radical, anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive social work,
- between quantitative sociology and evidence-based practice in social work, or
- between ethnomethodoly / actor-network-theory / discourse and narrative approaches to social work as approaches to describing and analysing social work practice and for instance looking for potentials and new horizons in social work

- than to move across these paradigms inside the disciplines respectively.

1. Selected trends in the development of Danish social work research

Even if Danish social work research, as in a number of other countries, is at an early stage of development, it is a quite heterogeneous field where several theoretical currents are represented. An overview published in 2005 listed five (ideal)types of research perspectives in social work research (Olesen, Eskelinen & Caswell 2005; selected illustrative references):
- Institutional theory; social work as framed/determined by institutional logics (Järvinen et al. 2002; Järvinen & Mik-Meyer 2003)
- Implementation theory; social work as policy implementation – outcomes related to policy aims (Winter 2002)

- Evidence-based social work; *what works* or *best practice* due to critical reviews of *best available evidence*, ideally randomised controlled trials (NCC)
- Practice research; knowledge based on studies carried out in close so-operation with practice or by practitioners themselves (Ramian 2003; Uggerhøj 2011 forthcoming)
- Empowerment

To these perspectives could be added quite a number of perspectives represented in present Danish social work research, e.g.:
- Institutional ethnography (Böcker Jakobsen 2005)
- Structural constructivism (Caswell 2005)
- Critical theory (Høilund & Juul 2005; Juul 2010)
- Critical realism (Andersen 2007; Ejrnæs & Guldager 2008)
- A dialogical, critical-constructive perspective (Eskelinen, Olesen & Caswell 2008)
- Discourse and conversation analysis (Kjærbeck 2003; Stax 2005; Olesen 2006)
- Narrative analysis (Skytte 2008)
- System-theory (Nissen 2010)
- Actor-network-theory (Elgaard Jensen 2005; Eskelinen & olesen 2010)

Accordingly a number of main social science theoreticians are represented in Danish social work research, e.g.: Bourdieu, Foucault, Campbell, Habermas, Honneth, Luhmann, Garfinkel, Latour, just to mention some of them. Theoretical debates are, however, seldom or lacking and attempts at initiating such debates have been rather in vain (Prieur & Skov Henriksen 2004).

This listing of these selected theoretical perspectives in Danish social work research, among others, shows that, even if they refer to the same field, the approaches available are highly heterogeneous. Social work as research field, consequently, is characterised by considerable internal variation, at the same time, as it is oriented towards a very complex practice field.

Heterogeneity and complexity is probably even bigger in some of the more established social science disciplines, including sociology. Nonetheless, this observation may lead to support of the point of view in this article that a discussion of and focus on the relationship between sociology and social work may overshadow connections between specific sociological perspectives and corresponding perspectives on social work. Differences inside the disciplines may, as argued in the introduction, be bigger than across the disciplines, especially when specific paradigms are represented in more than one discipline. Maybe as a consequence of this the dialogue between the different perspectives in Danish social work research have been rather scarce or even lacking (Prieur & Henriksen 2004). Dialogue, correspondence and references have been more frequent across the disciplinary borders.

In the next section of the article this is exemplified with a Danish study based on relational/interactionist theory. This perspective on social work is of relevance for analyses of how a specific practice is shaped and performed in everyday settings and how the content and consequences of social work appear seen from the point of view of the participants. It is not considered the one and only relevant perspective. Other perspectives are relevant if the research questions are focusing on structures framing practice or on effects/outcomes of interventions.

2. The relevance of a relational approach to sociology as well as social work practice

This section of the article illustrates the correspondence between specific sociologies and specific perspectives on social work with *actor-network-theory, ANT,* and *potentials of social work* as example. The idea is to illustrate how closely sociology and social work are or can be related when addressing a specific perspective rather than the disciplines as a whole. The perspective chosen for the illustration is my own main approach to social work research, which I of course find productive. The idea, however, is not to argue for the qualities of this as compared to other perspectives.

Actor-network-theory (ANT) is like ethnomethodology oriented towards the practice, including perceptions and methods, of the participants in social life and it is, further, like literary theory oriented towards actions ascribed to human as well as non-human actors (actants) according, for instance, to narratives of the participants (Latour 2007). These two aspects of ANT offer the opportunity of an open and dynamic perspective on practice rather than a more static focus on pre-conditions for this practice or on specific pre-defined effects. This is due to ANT's focus on imitation/translation rather than causation as the central principle for social life and, also, to the fact that action is ascribed to human as well as non-human actors (Blok & Jensen 2009; Held 2003; Jensen 2005; Latour 2007). Although immediately astonishing, the role of things/artefacts as actors/actants should not take social work researchers or practitioners by surprise. The role of e.g. drugs, medicine, dental treatment, computer monitors, counters in waiting areas etc. is obvious, as is the knowledge and the role of the individual client, the colleague sitting next to you, the immediate manager and local collaborators in the community. Social life correspondingly, in ANT, is understood as assembled and made possible by actants through chains of interconnection in networks – not as causally determined by the pre-conditions of the actions. On the contrary, if the aim of researching social work was to throw light on the effects of specific programs and methods or on the structural limitations on social work, other perspectives should have been chosen.

A main interest in how social work practice is shaped (how it is talked into being; Drew & Heritage 1992) invites a relational ontology and coexists well with e.g. ethnomethodology and ANT, both emphasising the 'methods' of the actors and the chains of interconnections through which the social is re-assembled (Latour 2007). Correspondingly, Koivisto (2007; 2008) has argued for a relational ontology drawing on ANT as meta-theoretical basis for social work research and evaluation. We took the same position in a recent study of cash-benefit recipients' perspective on the content and the consequences of employment oriented social work (partly, actually, after having discovered the resemblance between our research design and the design suggested by Koivisto). In this study we looked at how employment efforts and methods in employment-oriented social work 'emerged' in time and space and demonstrated how employment efforts were applied in social work practice, i.e. how interventions were translated to specific places, participants and situations. Arguing that the participants in social work practice have a privileged knowledge about what this practice is consisting of, we focused on their short narratives about the content and consequences of the interventions (Georgakopoulou 2006; Fina & Georgakopoulou 2009; Olesen & Eskelinen 2009; Eskelinen & Olesen 2010; Olesen & Eskelinen 2011).

The study was designed as a prospective multiple case study in two municipalities. It covered 19 marginalised cash benefit recipients (11 and 8 in the two municipalities respectively) with difficulties exceeding unemployment and not immediately ready for work. The cash benefit recipients were followed 3-5 times over one year. Observations and tape recordings of their encounters with the employment system as well as interviews with both cash benefit recipients and social workers in the employment system were made. Even case-files and other documents were collected. Case descriptions of the 19 cases involved were made based on interviews as well as observations and documents. The data of each case included several short narratives about work identity, which were put together in an overall characterisation of each case, based on the analytical focus points in the frame of analysis outlined above.

Further the cases were divided in three categories based on the degree of agency of the cash benefit recipient in his/her contact with the employment system. The three categories were:
- Low degree of agency / powerlessness on behalf of the cash benefit recipient
- Middle level of agency / reciprocal (mutual) interplay between cash benefit recipient and employment system
- High degree of agency / purposiveness on behalf of the cash benefit recipient

In each of the three categories two main cases were selected and an in-depth analysis of six cases, based on short narratives, was made following the frame of analysis. A sequence of events in each case was mapped and linkages between content and consequences of employment efforts were analyzed. Selected narratives from one of the cases characterized by middle level of agency / reciprocal interplay and demonstrating this sequence of events in presented in a display below. This middle category is of specific interest looking for implementation of employment efforts and potential effects of employment-oriented social work. In the two other categories of cases it might be argued that the intentions behind the employment effort are not specifically made relevant, translated or recontextualised into practice by the immediate actors. So what happens in the two other categories from the perspective of the immediate actors is not necessarily due to or closely connected with the employment effort as intended. In cases characterized by high degree of agency this might be seen as mainly a consequence of the cash benefit recipients' own purposes, whereas in cases characterized by powerlessness it might be seen as mainly a consequence of e.g. different barriers, institutional logics or other structural determinants.

Concluding, it could be argued that especially in the middle category of cases we have the opportunity to discover how social work as such is re-assembled, making it possible to trace the potentials it has and the difference it makes. The study shows the close correspondence between ANT and this type of social work research. The short narratives about work identity identified in the data were put together through a specific frame of analysis. It was not a biographical or life history perspective that guided descriptions and analyses. It is exemplified below with a display of selected short narratives from BB, one of the two main cases in the middle category.

BB was a male long time cash benefit recipient at the age of 48. At the outset he positioned himself as oriented at staying at home with his mentally ill son (even if the son had become an adult). He had been forced into activation approximately one year before the first research contact. However, at the same time he became aware of the opportunities for obtaining debt relief for persons being in work. He was in a practice placement as trainee in a firm and hoping for a flex-job in this firm, and he told about his ambivalence as regards joining working life. He didn't get the job but was declared entitled to a flex-job (with wage subsidy), and he actually found such a job by himself. Changes in agency and work identity according to BB's narratives appeared as comprehensive or even dramatic (especially compared to his situation before he was forced into activation). BB's short narratives kept emphasising the possible debt release and the opportunity to obtain independence of the welfare system as central. But he mentioned the relationship with his caseworker, grants for dental treatment and working clothes, and even positive experiences with reassuming a working life beginning with the trainee-placement as crucial. Summing up, the narratives of BB told a story about an everyday life, which made sense, but was disrupted and got a new perspective, including ideas about a working life; BB's agency was reduced, at least in the first round, and his work identity partly re-established.

Comparing BB's case with other cases in the middle category offers the opportunity to describe employment-oriented social work as emerging through reciprocal interplay and co-operation but even disagreement and conflict. Both human actors (e.g. co-operation with caseworkers and social network contacts) and non-human aspects (e.g. hash, dental treatment and working clothes) are assigned important roles in this reciprocity according to the short narratives. Overall and across all three categories the analyses concluded that from the perspective of the cash benefit recipients:

- The employment system from the perspective of the cash benefit recipients often appears as split up
- It does not appear as fine-meshed and sensitive; and finally
- The employment system does not sufficiently and adequately take the cash benefit recipients' problems, wishes and qualifications into consideration.

As regards the middle category of cases, characterised by mutual interplay, the importance of negotiating and thinking the ideas of the cash benefit recipients together with the employment effort was significant. As regards the cases characterised by powerlessness there seemed to be lack of power and capability not only among the cash benefit recipients, but also at the employment system. Finally, as regards the cases characterised by purposiveness was shown that the cash benefit recipients may succeed in taking initiatives autonomously, but even in these cases the employment system may play an important supportive role.

These three categories, however, should be taken as dynamic. Over time the same person, according to the case-descriptions based on the combined dataset, may move from one category to another. This actually serves as a further support for the potentials of an employment-oriented social work, as well as social work in general, translating and negotiating employment efforts to a point, where they integrate policy-intentions with ideas, wishes and qualification of the cash benefit recipients.

Display. Short narratives of BB

Case BB: Man 48 years old Focus in the analysis:	How is work identity and 'degree of agency' referred to in talk-in-interaction? Different examples of short narratives about work identity:
The frame of reference of the unemployed at the beginning of the follow-up period	*There is no doubt, that if I hadn't been forced in to activation, then I would have stayed at home with my son and received cash benefit like I have done all the other years.* *I felt we had made an agreement: You leave me alone – I take care of him* <mentally ill son> *At that time* <at the beginning of the forced activation> *I had no idea about getting work experience. That about debt relief was what inspired me to, that now it made sense to get rid of the welfare system.* *It's a little bit difficult to come and say to me, who has been on cash benefit for fifteen years, that now I am going to have a job. Now I am going to have a life like everybody else.*
The sequence of events during the follow-up period	Selected events mentioned in SNWI: Forced activation <before the follow-up period> →Traineeship (+dental treatment and working clothes) →Short period at activation project → approval of right to flex-job → flex-job <wage subsidy for reduced working capacity>
Contexts that are referred to	*She* <the caseworker> *is perceived like a peer. You thoroughly feel that she wants the best for you and that it is corresponding to, what you want yourself.* <As regards the activation project> *I can put it in two ways: the course of events has been fine. It has been a little bit rough, of course, but you get accustomed to it. But it has done me well to come out, also because the place where I came to, it was people like me … You can choose among a lot of thing. That's if I look at it from the outside. However, if I look at myself personally, then I found it tiresome. It was simply too rough. This was too much, because now I have been walking around taking care of my son. He suffers from schizophrenia, but he is not dangerous or something. I have been allowed to take care of him for five years.* *Yes, but I have gone through with it* <the practice placement> *so, I must even find it interesting, somehow .. It is healthy to come out and get something to do*
The development in work identity and agency	*If you are out at some place, then they may ask: 'Well, what are you doing?' Then, I have caught myself saying: 'I'm on my way to work'.*
Connections between 'treatment' and consequences to the unemployed including the central point in the narratives of the social welfare recipient	*The point is to make an agreement about reaching a goal. That is very, very important.* *It is just like I'm swimming in the middle of a river with apple-trees on the side and desert on the other (that is: it's not everyday life, but dependency and debt, that is a desert), and it is getting more and more difficult to remain on cash benefit. Obviously, it has to be more and more unpleasant.*

(*Italics* = quote from BB' short narratives; <Square brackets> = author's insertion)

To sum up, the narratives from the case BB show the correspondence between on the one hand analysing mechanisms, processes and relations through which the content and the consequences of employment oriented social work emerge and become consequential and on the other hand, in an ANT focused manner, analysing the chains of mutual interconnections through which social life is produced.

3. Conclusion: The relevance and 'division of labour' between (sociological) approaches and different perspectives in social work research and practice

The default understanding of the relationship between sociology and social work tends to be that social work is defined in relation to practice whereas sociology is defined with a

theoretical field as outset. Further, social work often is characterised as applied sociology. This tends to be misleading. Even sociology has a practice dimension, however broader and more complex than that of social work, and even social work has its 'own' theories, although the theoretical tradition is 'smaller'. Besides, social work draws on theories and concepts from other disciplines.

As regards the term applied, it occurs to me as obvious, however, that in social work a dimension referring to action is always present. Social work is placed at the crossroad between identifying social problems and client-identities on the one hand, and choosing interventions and methods among the possibilities and the repertoire at hand. Looking at this aspect of social work, however, it seems quite close to the ANT point of view of the social as put together and made possible overcoming difficulties and making alliances work.

The study mentioned above was drawing on developments in narrative inquiry and on actor-network theory. The rather close correspondence in this study between specific sociological approaches and specific approaches to how social work comes into being (is re-assembled), and has consequences through the actions of the participants, is more apparent than the differences between a sociological and a social work perspective at this subject matter. So, it seems more a matter of co-operation than of contrasting differences.

Looking at it this way the main differences and controversies are not between the discipline, and in this case specifically not between sociology and social work; rather it is between different ontologies, epistomologies and methodologies.

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