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Tensions and Potentials in a Formalistic Welfare Context

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Article

Community Work as Opposition: Tensions and Potentials in a Formalistic Welfare Context

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Abstract

A number of tensions pertaining to social problems and human suffering become apparent when analysing community work in a Danish welfare setting. As a source for critical reflection, we discern some of these challenges, but also potentials, which relate not only to a Danish context, but to challenges in any highly institutionalized welfare system. Three community work social enterprises serve to exemplify the objectives of addressing social problems by fostering participation and empowerment. To enhance and include the voice of service users, the programmes attempt to cultivate human resources as opposed to perceived formalism and a subsequent diminishment of the potentials of community inclusion. The formalistic governmental agendas are perceived to be unable to appreciate the diversity of service users' individual needs and social challenges, which produces conflicting prospects. Such a dichotomy between formalistic welfare practices and the ideals represented in the three enterprises offers a podium for users, professionals, policymakers and researchers to consider alternative expressions of community work, and how these can address social problems. We maintain that rapidly changing welfare models require an increased sensitivity to human suffering as a position embedded in the habitus and sociological imagination of community work. It is a source for reflection on the role of welfare arenas perceived as spaces in which service users ideally, based on their own social situation, can improve their social circumstances. It is an invitation to reflect on the potentials of community work in a diversity of cultures and practices.

Keywords

community, social work, civil society, social enterprise, formalism, opposition

Introduction

The Thrift Shop, The Social Company and The New Grocery – three social enterprises – serve to exemplify how social work is perceived in much different ways and enacted from differentiated ideals. This accentuates tensions because municipal agendas are being compromised; the social enterprises are in opposition to the local municipality's approach to social problems, which the participants (the service users and the employees) perceive as formalistic (Schauer, 1988; Mannen & MacAllister, 2017), thus presenting a hurdle for both service users and progressive community work.

We examine how the programmes, as community work, challenge formalistic welfare service, and we ask which frictions arise in a highly institutionalized context (Bevir, 2016; Branco, 2016; Clarke, 2018). *How can we understand community work in a welfare context? How can it develop, and what are the tensions and challenges in such community work practice?* We have raised the questions to address and attempt to understand social work and community work, both beyond and as a supplement to public welfare services. We wish to explore tensions in order to contribute to-, and develop, knowledge on resilience and autonomy in social work (cf. Eliasoph, 2009; Bevir, 2016; Svensson, 2016; Thydal & Svensson, 2017; Pentaraki, 2019; Rose & Palattiyil, 2020). This fosters critical reflection on welfare policy and social service (Svensson, 2017; Bak Nielsen, 2018; Jegermalm et al., 2018; van Bochove & Oldenhof, 2020), as well as an exploration of human ideals of social work, in contrast to the consequences of neoliberal trends (Dominelli, 2014; Kamali & Jönsson, 2019).

We see community work as a source of opposition to the perceived dehumanizing, formalistic dogmatism (Scott, 1989, 1992; Bauman, 2008; Gibson, Graham, & Cameron, 2010; Graeber, 2014; Clarke, 2018). The participants' dissatisfaction may seem oblique, but it is constantly being enacted as spaces of opposition; and if this were not the case, the programmes would no longer be alternatives, but instead an inherent part of the procedures to which they stand in opposition.

There is a need to embrace the potentials of diversity and alternatives in welfare service practice across human, economic and organizational sources (Harington &

Beddoe, 2013; Andersen, 2018; Jegermalm et al., 2018). The social enterprises form around complex and sometimes undiscovered approaches by focusing on a sense of community as meaningful social work (Lelieveldt, 2004; Svensson, 2014; Nykänen, 2020). The participants see a need to employ the potentials of diversity deriving from users' own experiences and social problems (Branco, 2016), and in order to transcend established norms and traditions, they wish to improve the lives and well-being of users by developing participation and social skills (Lorenz, 2005; IFSW, 2017).

Models in social work are often translated from one cultural context to another, which sketchily makes sense as there are shared human ideals at play, but solutions to social problems cannot always be directly converted if the best traits of different welfare systems are to be preserved. However, as a basis for critical reflection, we discern some tensions related not only to a Danish context, but also to general tensions in contemporary social work. We hope that our deliberations will urge social workers, service users, policymakers and scholars to explore such tensions of human suffering in and across welfare arenas.

We begin with some considerations on our qualitative data collection, and a presentation of the three social enterprises: The Thrift Shop, The Social Company and The New Grocery. This brings us to an outline of applied analytical concepts pertaining to community, social work and formalism. To help gain an understanding of the participants' motivations for opposition, we introduce their perceptions of the municipality's welfare agendas; we see their opposition as a reaction to institutional top-down pressure and to the close surveillance in a highly formalistic welfare context. Based on this, we finally explore the human values in the community social work as a source for critical reflection on contextual tensions and potentials in welfare service for the benefit of social change.

Fieldwork and three examples of community work

Our three examples are from data collected through ethnographic fieldwork over an interval of two years in a municipality in the south of Denmark. Due to the often vulnerable position of service users, their names and the names of the social

enterprises have been given pseudonyms: The Thrift Shop, The Social Company and The New Grocery.

The qualitative methods consist of participant observation, 20 semi-structured interviews and three focus group interviews, with four participants in each. Each interview is from one to two hours in length, and all interviews took place in the participants' own workplaces. Additionally, 12 regional politicians and officials in municipal positions have been interviewed. Municipal policies have also been analysed in order to gain insight into socio-political contexts (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).

We see qualitative fieldwork as a way to attempt to understand how people organize their lives in everyday relations, containing a diversity of topics such as trust and power, in addition to emotions like pleasure, pain and anger (Bernard, 1994; Wenger, 2008; Svensson, 2017). Attempting to decode power relations requires access to the dominated groups' discourses (Scott, 1992); as such, the three social enterprises are approached from an actor-oriented consideration, rather than as organizational phenomena. A number of trends and patterns in daily practice routines and value systems are prominent, which provides a framework for attempting to understand local knowledge, and how participants reflect and navigate in specific social settings and contexts (Mills, 1959; Graeber, 2014). The participants navigate by using changeability and diversity to deal with everyday challenges, and we focus on interaction in the social arenas, and the motivations for their actions (Hastrup, 2018). In this perspective, we attempt to examine inclinations expressed locally in order to discuss larger topics.

The social enterprises all engage socially vulnerable citizens – *users* – struggling with mental or physical disability, long-term unemployment or drug abuse. The social enterprises are facilitated by *employees* consisting of qualified social workers, pedagogues, technical professionals and volunteers. They are instigated by the municipality, and they are dependent on public financial support in a close but, as we have found, not always unproblematic collaboration in order to provide welfare services. Nonetheless, they function as completely self-organized entities, and the

employees autonomously decide and create the programmes' focus areas, and who may work there and which users can join.

Based on a recognition of users' individual challenges, the social enterprises are about inclusive participation to improve the quality of life. Ideally, the users will gain experience with entrepreneurship and innovation by developing resources and relations to civil society, business and municipal welfare services, thereby creating empowerment and upward social mobility. There is an additional goal of making the users education-minded or employable by learning professional and social skills. This latter goal is a shared agenda in both the social enterprises and the municipality.

The Thrift Shop

The Thrift Shop is a second-hand shop and a sewing workshop with 10 users and six employees. The programme is located in a vacated factory building near the region's main city centre. It has gathered momentum as several volunteers have joined, with many new initiatives continually being created; one of them is a venture into new markets with their own self-designed clothing brand.

Apart from employability and skills training, a significant aspect of the social enterprise aims to connect people to other sources of community. For example, the city's residents frequently deliver clothes for mending, and make use of the opportunity to meet the users by attending events like Christmas bazaars and seasonal sales.

Every morning begins with a short meeting to talk about the day's schedule, and to hear if anyone has a question or any current difficulties. To end the week, each Friday afternoon has a short social gathering with cake and coffee.

The Social Company

The Social Company produces woodwork and industrial components, and is physically situated in an abandoned industrial estate, spanning several workshops and former storage houses six kilometres from the region's main city. The Social Company has 40 users and 15 employees, with the programme aiming at empowering people by developing their skills in a range of technical areas. The

concept is to generate community and regional development to improve users' everyday coping and to develop employability. As a relation-building tool, the users are brought together in order to create a sense of community and network, through which they are intended to relate to the programme's goal of becoming self-reliant. Innovation by means of making use of the users' creativity is used to produce and develop new products; the users are responsible for both successes and failures, though they are not strictly accountable for failures.

The Social Company is too large to have daily assemblies for all participants, so at least once a week there is a meeting in designated sub-groups.

The New Grocery

The New Grocery is struggling to survive in a rural part of the municipality, situated in the premises of a former grocery, 20 kilometres from the largest city. The New Grocery emphasizes community development of the local neighbourhood by facilitating events such as communal eating, homework help and a flea market. The social enterprise, which has 12 users and six employees, functions as a job activation offer and an educational platform for people under the age of 30. It is organized as a partnership between local businesses, civil society and volunteers from the village. A café and a small assembly hall are run by the local volunteers, and on weekends it is also these volunteers who manage the grocery shop.

Typically, the users are driven by car each morning to work by an employee. The day then begins with a meeting over a light breakfast, and chores are distributed according to a set list of required activities for a grocery to function: cashier balancing, cleaning, baking bread, etc. The shopping is done twice a week, together with the users in a large wholesale supermarket, or in nearby shops advertising current offers.

Analytical reflections – community, social work and formalism

We propose that *community* as an analytical approach to social work could be more expounded upon (Harington & Beddoe, 2013). Community implies a diversity of themes, ranging from local dimensions like family, networks and social movements, to broader ones like nation-state and social class (Oltedal, Peña, & Hean, 2019).

People meet and are affected by each other, and community as an analytical concept is a way of attempting to frame an everyday sense of belonging and human values like cohesion, solidarity and mutual commitment (Lorenz, 2005; Jenkins, 2008; Wenger, 2008).

The three social enterprises exemplify community work in a setting centred on mutual recognition, empowerment and participation. Such relationships are ideally built by using one's own experiences to relate to each other from a belief that a common third can occur (Askheim et al., 2017; Hastrup, 2018). In the present context, we are inspired by an approach to community work expressed as an '(...) action in which participants in an ongoing group collectively discover, and work on solving shared problems, claiming to act on behalf of some collective identity, to create some good that they define as a public one' (Eliasoph, 2009: 294). We emphasize the empowerment-oriented approach to include users' own situations, social problems and potential human suffering (Habermas, 1971; Gramsci, 1999; van der Walt & Schmidt, 2009; Williams, 2012; Lichterman & Eliasoph, 2014). In this sense, community work aims to promote self-reliance and a sense of participation (Pfeilstetter, 2017; Decker, 2019).

Because social arenas are plural and dynamic, and as diverse as the people involved in them, we maintain a wariness of typologies and potentially epochal analyses (Marcus & Fischer, 1986; Hannerz, 2010). We are cautious of such universalist definitions, because community work is ever-changing, which we simultaneously see as a prerequisite for the programmes to be efficient in alignment with the needs of service users. However, we do apply the concept of community, but with an awareness that it may be criticized of not being value-neutral, hence implying mostly positive characters adjacent to concepts of harmony or cooperation (Mayo, 2004; Anderson, 2006; Jewson, 2007; Wenger, 2008; Clarke, 2018). In addition, overly idealistic views can be prevalent, because a sense of community may exist as no more than manifestations of boundary demarcations as a reaction to a perceived outer enemy (Taylor, 2010).

There is a close connection between community and social work as a source for knowledge about – and improvement of people's life situation. A redefinition and

reaction to perceived obsolete approaches to social problems have recurrently fostered community work programmes (Lorenz, 2005). Seltzer and Haldar (2015) describe this based on the activities of the women in Hull House in Chicago. By living among and addressing poor people's conditions with a focus on changing social circumstances, the women collected quantitative and qualitative data about the local neighbourhood. Their activities had ideological roots in an assertion that social problems derive from inequality and not personal inadequacy, with Hull House becoming central, not only to sociological investigation and theory, but also in attempting to improve community conditions and generate social change. Yet, paradoxically, this community- and practice-oriented approach became an argument for defining and delegitimizing specific social workers and researchers as non-sociologists (Seltzer & Haldar, 2015).

Since then, the relation between social work, community programmes and social science has been ambivalent and subject to continuous reflection and debate. The 20th century's 'clinical' (Kirk & Reid, 2002) social work research has been a way of approaching this dilemma, but this has possibly had the unfortunate effect of placing social work in a position identified by institutionalized and normative perceptions of what social work is, and what it should address, thus offering less space for alternatives and opposition, as we see expressed in the three social enterprises. From a view that change necessitates affective and human engagement to facilitate the enactment of alternatives (Gibson, Graham, & Cameron, 2010; Fallov et al., 2017), the programmes are a response to such institutionalized and established forms of community work. The purpose is to create settings in opposition to these perceived normative traditions by '[...] building solidarity through hands-on, sensual action [...]' (Lictherman & Eliasoph, 2014: 853). In this sense, the three programmes have much in common with initiatives such as Hull House and grassroots activism related to radical community work (Eliasoph, 2009; Ferguson & Lavalette, 2013; Dominelli, 2014).

For the purpose of conceptualizing the perceived municipal approach to social problems, we utilize *formalism* as a system-critical concept, which denotes an overemphasis on dogmatism and unquestioned ways of doing social work: 'It may be to condemn such a system only when it is taken to be absolute rather than

presumptive, when it contains no escape routes no matter how extreme the circumstances. [Formalism is] like the relation of fanaticism to enthusiasm, or bullheadedness to integrity, merely the extreme and therefore unfortunate manifestation of a fundamentally desirable characteristic' (Schauer, 1988: 548). Such representations of formalism are about placing a greater emphasis on external form and norms than on inclusive ideals (Mannen & MacAllister, 2017). As perceived among the participants, and as we have seen in the municipal policies, formalism in social work often occurs and arises from generalizing descriptions of social phenomena and problems at the expense of diversity and human values.

Perceptions of the municipal agendas

Relations between the social enterprises and the municipality are characterized by ambivalence for several reasons.

The municipality is perceived as an organization with a broad diversity among social workers, and most participants do not see the individual social worker employed in the municipality as the scoundrel. This generates a perception of social workers as either being technocrats, who want to formalize and standardize social services, or individuals who make an effort to enter into a dialogue in order to improve the lives of users.

The participants experience the cooperation as being riddled with challenges due to a lack of human-oriented approaches and understanding of the users' needs, which creates a feeling that the municipality would be better off by fading out demands of conformity.

The municipality's official narrative is that it works closely with service users and the social enterprises, though the participants experience both a physical and mental distance to the municipality as an impersonal institution. In fact, recent reforms have led to a physical centralisation of social work services and the economic administration. Janker, an employee in The New Grocery, says that since a nationwide reform in 2007 in the public sector, local perspectives have gone missing because there are now much fewer and larger municipalities. In his view, he feels that the reform has led to centralization in an overzealous manner, so it is therefore

necessary to bring community work back with initiatives to local arenas to develop the human potentials.

Anthony, an employee in The Social Company, continues this train of thought:

The municipality is rapidly centralizing all social work activities to [*the region's main city*]. Their ideas and the wish of us employees and users are at variance, and it will only serve to alienate us from the municipality as a formal institution. I know, because I am a trained social worker myself.

Tove, a user in The New Grocery, finds that in a centralization frenzy the municipality has closed down many schools and local social services, and that '*everything is moving towards the centre*'. She feels that suburbs and villages are becoming nothing more than residential satellite areas catering to the municipality's largest city, which in the long run will mean less diversity and sense of community. To counteract this process, Tove believes that social services should be decentralized and moved to areas throughout the region. Furthermore, this would force social workers to venture beyond their fixed physical locations and '*offices*', which she feels could encourage more social workers to more actively seek contact with users.

The programmes' employees work by facilitating diversity among users, because they believe that it provides the opportunity to contribute with whatever one is capable of:

We help people attain a good life with quality and a sensible job, without being exposed to a stressful private company with too high efficiency demands. There is a lot of willingness [*among the users*] and many abilities, but they are just other types of abilities. It is always a matter of how we can create a space for diversity. How can we get close to that?

In this quote, Karen, a volunteer in The Thrift Shop, applauds diversity as she believes that we are all different, and that no one is better than others. She experiences that users are best approached through trust and respect to create cultures that can develop human aspects, and she wants to find a way to utilize the users' value of their own accord so they do not become '*just another number in the queue*'.

The participants' attitudes to the municipality create a belief that they must themselves be instrumental in creating community to include the diversity deriving from the users' resources and everyday challenges and needs. From this sense of identity based on a dichotomy of the municipality as *the other*, the social enterprises

are expressions of opposition to a perceived dehumanization by constituting a 'resistance to institutional or colonial power through local cultural production' (Bernard, 1994: 15).

Human values and contextual tensions

'It's all about the coffee', says Selma, an employee in The Thrift Shop. An old wooden cigar box contains each week's tips to cover expenses for Friday afternoon's cake. Occasionally, a user will borrow a bit for food at the end of the month, which happens per the user's own responsibility. This sense of accountability has never been jeopardized, which Selma sees as an expression of the significance of human relationships and mutual trust. In her view, the cigar box is a symbolic representation of a sense of community and user participation.

A key goal of the programmes is to create user participation by developing and utilizing users' own strategies and solutions as a source for critical reflection. Such traits characterize the social enterprises as alternatives and opposition to the municipality's perceived impersonal approach to social work. Community work can be a resource for developing social work practice, professionalization and policy (Lichterman & Eliasoph, 2014; Garrett & Bertotti, 2017; Pentaraki, 2019), but as we see, it can be difficult to initiate. The programmes closely connect to municipal strategies of employability and job training, but tensions occur when the programmes insist on negotiating cultural norms (Taylor, 2010) related to the potentials of human diversity in social arenas (Mayo, 2004; McLeavy, 2009).

The diversity of responses to social problems can be explained in part by cultural perceptions of the citizen and the state, which provide different scenarios for community work. It is vital that potential solutions are based in a local context, because implementing universalist models between different social systems seldom equals social sustainability. As an example of this, financial emergencies have stimulated neoliberal policies (Lorenz, 2005; Pfeilstetter, 2017; Pentaraki, 2019) focused on cost-effectiveness and individualized solutions to social problems (Torfing, 2016; Juujärvi et al., 2020), and following the financial crisis in 2008, significant differences in addressing social problems in Europe became apparent.

'Mediterranean' countries are still trying to recover from the economic recession in an atmosphere of austerity, with countries like Germany and Holland, with traditionally strong welfare models also affected by these changes (Lorenz, 2005).

In Italy, welfare is formed from a diversity of charity, voluntariness and public and private resources. Here is an ongoing struggle to achieve state-institutionalized welfare agendas to help alleviate social problems beyond the family and local community (Lorenz, 2005). Oppositely, in the Nordic countries such as Denmark, state-initiated agendas of employment activation and investment in skills are prevalent. As we see expressed in the local municipality, this has created a highly institutionalized and intensely regulated social service system, which attempts to combine incentives to work with reduced social benefits (Lorenz, 2005; Torfing, 2016).

Thus, while family and community engagement has been a response to economic austerity in the Mediterranean countries, the Nordic countries have responded with well-intentioned, but formalistic innovations of social policy and service. A result is that in the latter countries, the socially weakest individuals do not choose, or have the resources, to participate inclusively in welfare service (Lelieveldt, 2004); instead, it may engage only the already active and well-functioning users.

Such expressions of social work lack the potentials of diversity arising from participatory approaches. It may place service users in a role of being a passive recipient, because they are permanently required to be accountable to formalistic agendas and obligations as we see represented by the municipality. On the other hand, the three social enterprises attempt to actively include users, which they see as a human-oriented resource in community development to deal with both individual and social problems.

Social work is diverse, and much more than a particular technical occupation (du Gay & Pedersen, 2020); numerous traditions, interventions and phenomena fall under the umbrella of social work. Initiatives such as the programmes can act as a response to neoliberalism's erosion of humanism (Lorenz, 2005; Ferguson & Lavalette, 2013) in welfare contexts. This implies a renewed understanding and restoration of social

work's human ideals (Branco, 2016) by both opposing and working alongside formalistic traditions. In our three examples, we see this diversity (Lorenz, 2005; Ferguson & Lavalette, 2013; Andersen, 2018) as an enacted critique of normative and formalistic dogma (Ferguson & Lavalette, 2013; Healy, 2014) in order to achieve social change.

Tensions and potentials for change

The social enterprises employ the diversity of participation and community, ideally to transform users' opportunities into a resource for social change (Healy, 2014; Branco, 2016). They recognize the nexus between personal and social change, consequently revealing tensions related to significantly different approaches when dealing with social problems. They point to a perceived need to counteract governance rationalities, which they view as amplifying inequality in a political socio-economic context (Dominelli, 2014).

However, working with human values like user participation in social work can be criticized for being an ideological regime, which students and practitioners may claim is a luxury with no practical relevance, and which is only afforded to academics and educators (Ferguson & Lavalette, 2013). The social enterprises are designed and implemented *for* people, but the service users will remain passive recipients if the mobilization of capacities and strengths cannot challenge and potentially change the formalistic conditions (Mills, 1959; Habermas, 1971; Gramsci, 1999; Kirk & Reid, 2002; Arendt, 2004). The potentials of the three programmes and other initiatives, such as Hull House's social citizenship ideals, can reveal complex dimensions of community work in relation to human dimensions of diversity and user participation vis-à-vis governance rationalities (Villadsen & Turner, 2016). Community work is then not only a practice-oriented concept for how people can relate to their own social situation together; it is also a critical standpoint from where to address and potentially change reasons for social problems.

Human suffering appears in various shapes, although the causes are related to power mechanisms of governance agendas and social inequality, which remain invisible if the potentials of diversity are only marginally acknowledged. Self-reliance and empowerment cannot take place if the users are not invited to participate

(Foucault, 1982). We contend that these ideals are attainable and not merely an idealistic ambition, but to succeed in opposing and changing formalistic social work routines it requires tangible strategies of including human values, like the implementation of user participation (Kolbjørnsrud, 2018; Kamali & Jönsson, 2019).

The social enterprises exist at the periphery of the immediate control of the municipal governance, and from here opposition as an enacted critique of power takes place. Both domination and opposition are evident in total institutions such as slavery or feudalism (Goffman, 1968), and we argue that the dialectic in our empirical data is similar. Domination deprives the subjugated of reciprocity and dialogue, which then implicates reaction in the form of oppositional sentiment or indignation (Williams, 2012; Graeber, 2014). Subjugated individuals, such as peasants or slaves with no voice in matters concerning themselves (Scott, 1989), can attempt to subvert the appropriation of their work and production (Scott, 1992). From such a perception, the participants do not always express their attitudes straightforwardly, but are constantly enacting them in the programmes as spaces of opposition.

The programmes challenge normative understandings of social problems and social work (Fook, 2012; Healy, 2014) by conveying issues of disparity and powerlessness. From an insistence on human responsibility, they work *with* the users and insist on counteracting municipal formalism and external control. Attempting to venture beyond these procedures (Turner, 2008) emphasizes not allowing perceived impersonal and institutionalized systems to change the human-oriented core of social work. Based on his extensive research in social movements, David Graeber [RIP 2020] (2014) proposes opposition to such formalistic work procedures by not giving them the respect they are expected to generate, or to pretend that nothing has changed, or to fill out forms immediately and then simply ignore them at once. He finds that direct confrontation often ends up distorting the original purpose into an unrecognizable variant of what one initially wanted to change, and that the same agendas as the ones opposed will then develop.

From this perspective, the social enterprises' subtle opposition are clever and effective strategies. Ideally, they may be able to succeed in changing certain forms of social work, because such flexible opposition can change the focus from what people

do to an emphasis on what people do not want to do. We see this potential exemplified in the three social enterprises by insisting on social change pertaining to the diversity of human-oriented ideals, community and user participation.

Conclusion

Community work presents a source for reflection on welfare arenas, and we have proposed to perceive it as efforts in which service users – based on their own social situation and the experiences that human suffering may entail – can ideally improve their own social conditions. Though the examples are from a Danish context, we maintain that our findings and discussions will also resonate with global tensions of social work and welfare service.

Tensions arise because municipal agendas tend to overlook the diversity among users, and thus merely provide standardized dimensions of social work. The three social enterprises seek to address such strains by nurturing diversity from a sense of community, responsibility and empowerment; we argue that the programmes offer opportunities to reactivate the empowerment-oriented assertions, as seen in early foundational community projects like Hull House (Seltzer & Haldar, 2015).

The examples show a form of community work, in which a diversity of solutions are mobilized to address social problems, such as offering social networks and the capacity-building of knowledge and skills from the incentive to allow people to participate in society (Rodríguez & Ferreira, 2018). A concern, however, is that the social enterprises lack user participation, so one may ask where is the active engagement that community work would demand. Another tension pertains to challenges when attempting to change foundational causes to human suffering, which is the aspiration of anti-oppressive and radical social work.

Potential solutions to these tensions relate to the recognition of diversity as opposed to formalistic approaches to social problems, as much social work in the municipality is perceived to be.

By contrast, there is a need to be aware that alternative social work will not take place at the expense of core public welfare service. Community work can deliver new

solutions to some gaps in social service, but it cannot not take full responsibility for welfare in the Danish context. Because neither state, market nor civil society alone can handle social problems, there is need for a combination of efforts to provide solutions.

Related to this is how social innovation and alternative forms of social work are recognized within the established systems. Social workers trained in formalistic settings may not have experience with facilitating self-reliance and participation. It is even possible that some will feel uncomfortable by entering into such work. One could argue that it would be placing too heavy a burden on social workers in relation to social problems that they are not capable of changing. Nevertheless, we maintain that rapidly changing welfare models require social workers to be increasingly sensitive to human suffering. Such an ambition is both an epistemological and ontological position, embedded in the habitus and sociological imagination of the social worker, depending on cultural context and traditions (Mills, 1959; Nissen, 2015; Lyons, 2016).

Both for users and social workers, community work can contribute to resilience and opposition (Lorenz, 2005; Ferguson & Lavette, 2013; Thydal & Svensson, 2017; Rose & Palattiyil, 2020) to the perceived dominance of formalistic and individualistic agendas in welfare settings. It can potentially influence how welfare service is provided, and how we can meet each other from a perspective of human recognition. Time will tell whether projects like the three social enterprises are merely epochal, or in the long term will prove to be socially sustainable as a supplement – or perhaps even as a substitute – to formalistic social work. If they are given space and time to develop, we see potentials in such programmes as a move toward a more egalitarian and inclusive social work. In the meantime, and in any case, The Thrift Shop, The Social Company and The New Grocery represent perceived much-needed alternative social innovation by insisting on incorporating the diversity of human potentials deriving from user participation and a sense of community.

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