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Publication date:
2011

Document Version
Early version, also known as pre-print

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Olesen, S. P. (2011). *Sociological approaches as perspectives on and in social work*. Paper presented at International Seminar on Sociology and Social Work, Lissabon, Portugal.

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Sociological approaches as perspectives on and in social work

**Paper for Sociology and Social Work –
Past, present and future, Lisbon, May 27-28, 2011**

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Sociology and social work

- Two different fields/disciplines
- Common origins

Differences/similarities between the disciplines (selected examples):

- critical theory and critical/radical, anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive social work,
- quantitative sociology and evidence-based practice in social work, or
- ethnomethodology / 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

Risk of oversimplification!



Selected trends in Danish social work research (2005):

- 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 co-operation with practice or by practitioners themselves (Ramian 2003; Uggerhøj 2011 forthcoming)
- Empowerment

Further trends in Danish social work research:

- 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)

- This listing of 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.

- This observation may lead to support of the point of view 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.

- A recent Danish study of the content and consequences of employment-oriented social work from the perspective of cash benefit recipients
- Correspondence between specific sociologies and specific perspectives on social work with *actor-network-theory*, *ANT*, and a *potentials of social work* approach
- 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
- 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, due to ANT's focus on imitation/translation rather than causation as the central principle for social life

- The study showed 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
- The participants in social work practice have a privileged knowledge about what this practice is consisting of
- Focus on short narratives about the content and consequences of the interventions
- 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, followed 3-5 times over one year) with difficulties exceeding unemployment and not immediately ready for work

- Three categories based on the degree of agency of the cash benefit recipient in his/her contact with the employment system:
 - 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
- 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
- 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

- 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.
- 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, epistemologies and methodologies.