

## Revitalising the concept of surface and depth

*An analytical tool for critical reflection*

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# Revitalising the concept of surface and depth: an analytical tool for critical reflection

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## Abstract

This chapter reviews how the scientific, academic disciplines and theories of the social sciences have evolved from modernism to postmodernism in parallel with a neoliberal governance of postmodern societies. This parallel track in knowledge generates a transformation from depth to surface in social work practice and a revival of social work practices focusing on treating the individual behaviour, or act, rather than the actor and the multi-layered setting around him/her/them, the psychiatric symptoms through individualised manualised practices, rather than the causation. The individual's social performance is highlighted, and the emphasis is on contracts, task completion, and skills training rather than depth-ontological insights or reform. The chapter demonstrates, through a theoretical review and illustrative examples, how the concepts of surface and depth can be helpful in analysing the development from modernism to postmodernism in the social sciences, the logic of the global markets and management rationales, and its epistemological and ontological consequences in social work; but also how depth ontological understandings of social problems can facilitate critical awareness and function as a critical reflective lens of hegemonic knowledge positions and marginalised knowledge as well as transformative social work.

## Introduction

In the political and cultural contexts of the 21st century, the analytical concept of ‘surface and depth’ proves useful in understanding how knowledge in international research, theory, and practice is interrelated with logics involving cultural, political, and professional understandings (Howe, 1996). In what follows, we review how the scientific, and academic disciplines and theories of social problems, mental illness, and social work have evolved in parallel with a more societal and political movement in knowledge.

A celebration of liberal values and the autonomy of the individual has in recent years coincided with the emergence of what we call a ‘postmodern’ neoliberal age, where academic truth and knowledge have become relative to time and place (Spector & Kitsuse, 1977). Since then, social constructionism has gradually developed in a variety of ways.

The construction of social problems can be studied as embedded in interactional, institutional, and wider management technological settings (Best, 2017; Miller & Holstein, 1993; Rose & Miller, 2010). While social constructionism has been and still is popular in universities, the parallel knowledge used to manage the institutions and populations of society draws on empirical knowledge of scientific clarity, reliability, and objectivity. The convergence of these parallel movements in knowledge creates conditions and a limited epistemology for critical reflection. This article demonstrates how the analytical concept of ‘surface and depth’ proves helpful in this development.

Reflection is not, by definition, critical. It is quite possible to be reflective, staying ‘at the surface’ while focusing solely on processes, methods practices, and negotiations in practice, leaving unquestioned the criteria for such procedures, making a set of practices smoother, and achieving the goals intended. But this is not a critical reflection in the point of view of this chapter. To be able to move beyond the political agendas, we suggest a realistic ground and a more inclusive metatheory for both research and practice that moves *beneath the surface* of social phenomena to focus on: uncovering the depth in the methodological and the theoretical understanding of social problems, revitalising an ontological depth as an analytical tool for critical reflection, advancing human capacity to influence the structures and conditions that construct suffering and difficult life situations.

## **Reflections on forms of knowledge in the social sciences**

The movements in different knowledge positions in the social sciences are in the following divided into two central and parallel tracks:

1. Knowledge in research: The development of knowledge in the social sciences as a scientific movement from modernism to postmodernism.
2. Knowledge of governance: The development of societal, empirical knowledge as a foundation for the governance of liberal states.

We have chosen this distinction, knowing that it serves an analytical purpose and that reality is obviously more complicated than the ideal-type distinctions allow us to illustrate. Knowledge in the two parallel tracks: the knowledge of liberal governance that permeates the management of liberal states on the one hand and the development of knowledge in the social sciences in the academic institutions on the other, has not been the same. *Yet, both tracks have several similarities. Not in the knowledge, they favour, but in the knowledge they exclude.* With an analytical focus on the space for critical reflection established in the convergence of the two movements, it becomes clear how the two powerful and historical movements in knowledge jointly have contributed to the development of a particular and delimited critical consciousness and epistemology in the knowledge of social problems and social work.

The chapter is divided into three parts. The first part describes the historical development of theories within the social sciences, including implicit theories in social work and theories of social problems in the transition from modernism to postmodernism. The second part describes the knowledge of governance; the analytic and meta-scientific basis for managing and categorising target groups; and the development of societal, empirical knowledge as a foundation for the governance of neoliberal states.

In the final part of the chapter, we reveal how the two movements reinforce each other through a unified perspective, and we reveal how the theoretical ‘depth and surface’ distinction can be used as an impetus for critical consciousness, critical reflection, and social change.

## **From modernism to postmodernism in social sciences: theories of social problems and social work**

‘A child of modernity, social work now finds itself in a postmodern world, uncertain whether or not there are any deep or unwavering principles which define the essence of its character [...]’ (Howe, 1994).

In ‘Modernity, postmodernity and social work’, Howe (1994) describes a scientific development from premodern Europe’s view of the world as God-given in ‘the great chain of being, where men and women did not consider themselves as the authors of their destiny’ (Ibid 1994). At this point in history, people rarely questioned their position and lot in life, and the truth could only be obtained by a persistent study of God’s word. Few sought to improve and change nature and the world.

## **The withdrawal of God meant a triumphant entry of humankind**

In the modern period, the position of God was redefined. Science came into focus, and in the 17th century, nature and society became something that could be controlled, managed, and ordered (Bauman, 1992, 1994). The focus was on science and humanity’s ability to explain, exploit, control, and use natural and human resources. Knowledge production could take place outside cultural contexts and settings. Through reason and systematic observations, human beings could discover the ‘true’ nature of things unaffected by time, place, culture, and society (Bauman, 1994). Science was an external perspective, where the research established patterns, quantities, and distributions at a distance based on the idea that phenomena could be observed, weighed, or measured empirically. This positivist perspective on knowledge implied that scientific criteria were considered universal and independent of context, human consciousness, and interpretation. The scientific ideal was to produce value-free, impartial, universal, and objective knowledge that could be replicated by others (Layder, 1998; Sayer, 2010)

These universal criteria of scientific truth became a dominant epistemology to facilitate the governance, control, and regulation of humanity, society, and nature. After the Second World War, there was a need for stability, coherence, and internal peace in the new economies and societies. Perhaps therefore this period was a golden age for logical positivism and structural-functionalist perspectives. The sociological theorist who had the most influence in this period was Talcott Parsons (Parsons, 1985, 1991). During the years after World War II, his structural-functionalist theorising developed. He presents the need for stability and the interrelationships between all sectors and functions of society are analysed in a unified social system. For a long period up until the 1950s and 1960s, this was the dominant understanding, but in the 1960s, Europe started changing. Class revolts, social ruptures, and currents of

change occurred. Structural functionalism assuming that society is dependent on stable systems was no longer as applicable as it was before. There was a need for new theories to describe the new era and the new ideas flowing through Europe, focusing on solidarity across diversity, complexity, dynamism, and conflict for the purpose of enabling social change (Brookfield, 2009; Reinbacher, 2012). The critique of the political economy and of the sociological bourgeoisie shaped the realisations of the era. Reading Karl Marx's 'Capital' constituted the foundation of Marxist knowledge for sociologists and social scientists. A social science emerged to uncover ideological conditions, alienation, humanity, society, and the human condition within society (Ringø, Nissen, Fallov, Birk, & Kjærulff, 2017). The period of modernity in social work was at its peak during the 1960s and 1970s, and attempts were made to synthesise theories and practices into a unified foundation for social work (Howe, 1994, p. 519). During the 1960s, a flush of alternative paradigms struggled to fill the vacuum produced by Parsonsian structural functionalism's precipitous decline (Dello Buono, 2013). Social theorists such as Habermas and Luhmann stood on the shoulders of Parsons but tried to develop another theoretical ground focusing on communicative actions for understanding the complexities and possibilities for a modern differentiated society where unity could not be taken for given. Qualitatively interpretive, perceptive, and subjective approaches found were these years accepted in the social sciences. These interpretive approaches would eventually provide the ground and later develop into modern social constructionism. In this process, the 'grand theories' were rejected by postmodernist theories in the years to come. In the shift from the modern to the enthusiasm for the postmodern social constructionist directions, a rejection of grand narratives, grand theories, universal standards, critique of ideology, justice, and normative ideals of 'the good' arose. In this development, the position and content of social work change parallel to changing definitions of what social problems are and how they are best understood. Particularly influential in this regard was Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's 'The Social Construction of Reality' (Berger & Luckmann, 1992) which moved the social sciences in a more subjectivist, but also a more constructionist direction (Dello Buono, 2013). However, Berger and Luckmann later distanced themselves from the predominantly constructionist reading of their theory, proclaiming that they are much more realistic in their perspective than the subsequent orthodox constructionist interpretations and explanations of their theory. Berger further clarifies that he and Luckmann explicitly rejected those more inclined to postmodernist approaches and actually saw their own work as a defence of enlightened modernism that remains reasonably realist. Indeed, Berger (2011, pp. 94–95) accuses postmodernism of 'hijacking' their legacy while he questions the emerging constructionist approach for its failure to grasp the nuanced existence of social

facticity, something which in his view amounts to a ‘nihilistic recipe for disaster’ (Dello Buono, 2015). Regardless of how nice a read this post-rationalisation from Berger is, it does not change the fact that the constructionist reading and interpretation of Berger and Luckmann’s ‘The Social Construction of Reality’, contributed to the following decades’ gradual academic rejection of the more ideology-critical and depth ontological insights (Ringø, 2013a). The theoretical foundation denigrated the objective metabolism of social life by relegating social ontology to an exclusively subjective plane. The grand theories were discarded, and the interactionists came into play with Malcolm Spector and John Kitsuse's work, ‘Constructing Social Problems’ (1977). It was this work that completed the paradigmatic circuit, consolidating the emergence of ‘social constructionism’ as an indispensable part of the social science research at this time. Everything and anything were potentially now eligible to be a social problem. Once problematic claims are made collectively ‘real’, they are real in their consequences and must therefore be treated as social problems. The knowledge of everyday life, the collective knowledge that is shaped and reshaped in the interaction between people came into focus (Spector & Kitsuse, 1977). Since then, social constructionism has gradually developed in a variety of ways and the construction of social problems can be studied as embedded in interactional, institutional, and wider societal settings (Best 1995, 2004; Nissen, 2014). The emphasis was on knowledge and definitional processes that distanced themselves analytically from moral judgements and proclaimed ‘A critique does not consist in saying that things aren't good the way they are. It consists in seeing on what type of assumptions, of familiar notions, of established, unexamined ways of thinking the accepted practices are based’ (Bacchi, 2009; Foucault, 1982). The preconditions for social change could be created by seizing the definitional processes (Deleuze, 1994). Deleuze argues that we remain ‘slaves so long as we do not control the problems themselves, so long as we do not possess a right to the problems, to a participation in and management of the problems’ (Bacchi, 2009). By drawing attention to a need of claiming the right to the problems, attention is drawn to the importance and significance of the problems’ definitional process and to struggles over how the problem should be understood (Brookfield, 2009). Thus, Deleuze (and postmodernism) suggests that the struggle over problem definitions is a way of influencing how problems are solved (Deleuze, 1994). What characterises the postmodern era in the social sciences is that the starting point or the scientific focus is not on identifying real problems but on identifying how problems are represented (Loseke, 2017). The opening description of this article is that an interesting analytical point in this development is not *the knowledge that is favoured, but the knowledge that is*

*excluded*, in this development from modernism to postmodernism in the contemporary policy, social science, and practice.

## **Modernity, postmodernity, and political governance in social work**

In his article from 1994, David Howe mentions four themes central to the postmodernist era: pluralism, participation, power, and performance. In particular, the pluralistic diversity of opinions, theories, and discourses emerges as a reaction to the attempts of the 1960s and 1970s to create general theories and concepts about the content of social work, underpinning the surface of social work manifestations. No group has at this time in history the monopoly on the truth or the exclusive control over what is to be valued. The relativist, in contrast to the universalist, believes that all forms of behaviour are local; there can be no such thing as human nature, for what is 'natural' in one part of the world, will be regarded as 'unnatural' in another (Howe, 1994).

Pluralism is, on the one hand, a political practice that tolerates difference and diversity and does not seek to impose one group's ideal vision on all people. On the other hand, the pluralistic ideals became a rebellion against theories that sought to explain the emergence of marginalisation, oppression, alienation, and social problems through theoretical reflections. This development coincided with several movements from 1980 onwards, including the political reality, perhaps most notably Margaret Thatcher's political speech that cut the head off the great state narrative and the associated welfare state responsibilities (Thatcher, 1987).

Both the development of a political neoliberal truth as a foundation for the governance of liberal states and the popularity of social constructionist knowledge in the social sciences was the bearer of the same epistemological limitations: that is an epistemological movement away from what could be termed as depth-ontological understanding in the social sciences. This means a lack of deep knowledge about the complex mechanisms, generating inequality, lack of well-being, social problems, and human suffering.

By moving the central problem representations and descriptions away from a depth in the social sciences in line with the constructionist decentralisation of truth, the political responsibility was decentralised too, to local units such as family units, individuals, advocacy groups and not to a collective, public welfare system. The citizen seeking help was, consequently, no longer a client who was met by an expert with a theoretical foundation for care. Instead,



vulnerable groups were users of services embracing the idea of autonomy (Blad, 2011; Dean, 2010; Rose, 2007). In this discourse, the person seeking help later became a citizen, customer, and collaborator.

In addition to the decentralisation of knowledge, a series of ramifications of responsibilities, values, and opinions made the governance of liberal democracies more complex and opaquer (Blad, 2011; Dean, 2010; Rose, 2007). With the dismantling of the knowledge base of the governing and regulating state, the definitional processes in the administration of social work in welfare states aspiring to (neo)liberal ideas suddenly became a significant area of exploration and management. Understanding and management were no longer a mode of knowing', but a dialogic activity (Howe, 1994; Klemm, 1986). This had an impact on the organisation of the professional practice, but also on the encounter with clients, who evolved during the period from being clients to being different kinds of collaborators (Monrad, 2020).

In parallel with the entry of postmodernism into the social sciences, the period from the 1980s onwards was one in which decentralised policies based on NPM rationales dominated the public sector governance internationally. The development represented new ways of producing truth, based on two different but intertwined technologies. Action technologies, which seek to enhance and improve our abilities to participate, consent, and act, and performance technologies, which make these abilities calculable and comparable so that they may be optimised: *'Together, these technologies create a new link between behavioural regulation and the technical prerequisites for performance optimisation'* (Dean, 2010; Foucault, 1982).

In scientific terms, the new scientific criteria for governance rationales were based on a dismantling of modernity's grand narratives and theoretical conceptualisations of the dialectical relationship between individuals and society. The increased use of evidence-based, manual methods in the public sector was expected to make social work more transparent, reliable, standardised, and cost-effective. Likewise, the development of new criteria for categorising social problems, vulnerable groups, and psychiatric diagnoses had an impact on the development of concepts and theories during the period.

The emergence of evidence-based methods and new diagnostic systems have several things in common, namely that they are launched as atheoretical tools that enable context-independent, value-free classifications, and input-output measurements. The standardised methods, diagnostic systems, and research methods expectedly ensure more efficient time and cost management but also high reliability and thus can be used as effective communication tools across national, institutional, and contextual settings.

The most explicit example of this development, and its practical consequences, is the shift in the diagnostic systems in the 1980s (DSMIII-ICD10). From that time on, the diagnostic systems were based on descriptions of symptoms. The former theoretical ambition to understand whether the observed symptoms of human suffering, mental illness, marginalisation, anxiety, and other symptoms of social problems were expressions of adaptive strategies and reactions to structural conditions, as communicative phenomena taking place at the group level, as expressions of social and societal transformations or social pathologies, and thus as a cultural and social phenomenon taking place at the societal level, or as disorders arising from and identifiable as a mental or biological phenomenon and therefore to be treated as such, was challenged (Ekeland, 2014; Ringø, 2013a; Sadler, Wiggins, & Schwartz, 1994). The clinical interest in whoever one diagnosed and categorised *was* subsequently replaced by a focus on symptom descriptions and surface-level categories. For an elaboration of the content, development, and function of the psychiatric diagnostic systems in the field of psychiatry and social work in this period, see Ringø (2013b). The same problem applies to several other areas in social work with vulnerable groups, where categorisations are being established without in-depth knowledge of the individual's particular challenges, disabilities, circumstances, and conditions for participation.

Meta scientific discussions came to revolve around the question of the reliability of scientific categories and critics pointed out that high reliability says nothing about the validity of the constructed categories (Ekeland, 2014). The discussion concerned whether, in the process of scientific construction, we had forgotten that the symptom descriptions and the categorisations might not describe the underlying problem and chain of integrative causes: the map (epistemology) might not fit with the terrain (ontology) (Ekeland, 2014; Ringø, 2013a). Concepts and categories thus became more fluid terms, forming the basis for abstract forms of assessment, categorisation, referral, and agreement 'on the surface' of the frontline, but often covering a range of unresolved and underlying differences in the understanding and explanation of what the problem is and hence what interventions would be most appropriate. This was a development that coincided with the managerial and scientific movements, summed up nicely by Mayes and Horwitz (2005, p. 261): 'Rather than focusing on any *underlying* psychological causes for mental disorders, Kraepelin stressed classifying them according to their unique symptoms, course of development, and eventual outcome'.

## Specialised forms of knowing

In social work, the dismantling of specialised depth-ontological forms of ‘knowing’ led to a new use of concepts such as independence, autonomy, self-realisation, resources, and rehabilitation. It is the belief of the authors of this chapter, that this took place, to a greater extent, without involving specialised forms of knowing; in-depth socio-factual, knowledge of the interactional mechanisms that create the conditions for human well-being.

What mainly characterised the meta scientific movement in the governance of state institutions and practices was the withdrawal from the theoretical foundation that had a universal, moral, and value-laden ethos, but also a withdrawal from theories that contained an explanatory power regarding the emergence and development of social problems, mental disorders, and social pathologies and thus a societal critical reflective and explanatory ambition (Ringø, 2013a). Research during this period moves from a sociological orientation, where it examined the more objective aspects of inequality and poverty, to a more psychological orientation, examining the social behaviour of individuals and their psychological and emotional problems.

In this period, the focus in the social sciences shifts from issues that can be prevented or remedied through social and educational policies to be a question of the extent of ‘cultural’ resources in individual families. A risk-oriented professional approach to vulnerable families focusing one-sidedly on lack of skills, deviant behaviour, and/or the problematic lifestyle of the parents arose. This approach has in the years to follow been criticised for hindering a holistic approach to families and children’s well-being (Egelund & Tetner, 2009; Nissen, 2011). Despite this, contemporary research reveals how frontline workers implement and reproduce an individualised discourse found in recent social policy reforms while overlooking societal structures defining the individual’s (limited) possibilities. In particular, mechanisms such as poverty are left unrecognised, as categorisations of ‘normal’ versus ‘vulnerable’ revolve around family relations and perceptions of personal shortcomings of the parents (Nørup & Jacobsen, 2021). Theories that investigated the underbelly of society’s manifestations and problems, questioning why the problems arose and theorising about their solutions, were omitted during this post-ontological and postmodernistic period and for a long time to come (Ringø, 2013b). Not only in social research but in general as a movement in terms of the scientific criteria of scientific relevance and priorities in the social and human sciences as well as in the health sciences, namely the psychiatric research unit:

Both the economic and the human costs of, e.g., schizophrenia, affective disorder, and anxiety disorders are enormous. Given the importance of these diseases, the resources devoted to

determining their *causation* are modest. While several thousand patients are working full-time to treat the symptoms and social consequences of the mental illnesses, only a small number of people are working to clarify the *background* of the illnesses.

(Jørgensen, Bredkjær, & Nordentoft, 2012)

Not only in psychiatry but also in social work, a post-ontological concept of learning set the direction for the encounter with vulnerable groups in society. The postmodern analyses meant that social work's knowledge base is no longer primarily determined by the inherent nature of the client's professionally diagnosed condition (Howe, 1996), which had several practical implications:

There has been a return to treating the ACT rather than the ACTOR, the offense rather than the offender. [...] the individual's social performance is all that matters. Hence the emphasis on contracts, task completion, and skills training rather than treatment or reform.

(Howe, 1994, p. 527)

In an evaluation of a comprehensive social and employment initiative concerning vulnerable families and children in Denmark, it became clear that the project's attempts to work with an abstract definition of key concepts such as well-being, holism, and human needs resulted in a diminished understanding of the mechanisms that facilitate well-being, or the opposite in vulnerable families (Baadsgaard, Nørup, Jørgensen, and Ringø, forthcoming). Thus, at the time of the completion of the evaluation, more than half of the families did not feel that the things they wanted to be changed in their situations were adequately addressed. Basically, the project was rolled into an application of popular concepts such as well-being, needs, wishes, and dreams without it becoming clear during the project period how the concepts could be operationalised, or quite fundamentally, which mechanisms and conditions of vulnerable families actively enable or produces well-being, or the opposite. The concept of needs and well-being remained fluid, abstract, and unclear at the end of the project and was not followed up by interventions to support it (Baadsgaard, Nørup, Jørgensen, and Ringø, forthcoming).

Thus, in the social sciences, the lack of in-depth qualitative knowledge and theory development about which mechanisms create well-being in vulnerable families are enrolled in the development of knowledge in liberal states

(Greenberg, Domitrovich, & Bumbarger, 1999; Potvin & McQueen, 2007; Wells, Barlow, & Stewart-Brown, 2003).

In international research on well-being, the concept of well-being refers to different theoretical and philosophical approaches to quality of life, but the attempts to define well-being as a contextual concept with a focus on causes of lack of well-being are not integrated into policy and governance (Bradshaw, Keung, Rees, & Goswami, 2011). In practice as well as in research, there seems to be a fragmented, individualistic, and economic approach to knowledge concerning social problems, human suffering, and in this case, well-being as a starting point for intervention and social work. Scientifically, the political and management-oriented movement in the governance of society has coincided with the theoretical development in academia from modernism to postmodernism. When there are no privileged positions and perspectives about the depths of reality, when no state or knowledge authorities can define norms about the good life, and when research is concerned only with *how* truth and knowledge are epistemologically *created*, negotiated, reshaped, and produced in networks within the contexts in which people participate, the possibilities for analytical reconstruction based on conceptualisations of the mechanisms and developments in society that create social problems are limited (Howe, 1994; Ringø, 2013b).

The forms of subjectivation whose creation was attempted to develop the human 'on the surface' are manifold: dialogical interaction, constructionist management, motivational dialogue, coaching, mindfulness, psychoeducation, co-creation, development, flexible learning spaces, the range of approaches are many. To this, a range of standardised, evidence-based programs should be added as bearers of the same epistemological limitation. The commonality is that the understanding of the problem stays at the surface, with a focus on individual behaviour and performance. At the same time, we witness dramatic increases in the number of young people who are diagnosed, fail to thrive, or who completely give up on engaging with society, education, and the labour market (Sundhedsstyrelsen 2017, 2018, CEVEA 2019 (Lasgaard & Friis, 2015; Woodman & Wyn, 2014).

Thus, it is more relevant than ever to question whether the societal, managerial, and solutional models of knowledge and governance produce new social and psychiatric forms of expression, problems, disorders, and lack of well-being. Do the new opportunities and demands of humanity bring along their own costs in contemporary civilisations? The paradox remains that an understanding of such contexts requires a *depth-ontological* understanding of social problems, well-being, human suffering, and mental disorders. A deep understanding that is increasingly omitted as a necessary tool of observation in the postmodern age (Howe, 1994; Reckwitz 2019; Ringø, 2013a).

## Surface and depth as a promising analytical concept in critical reflection

In the first parts of the chapter, we reviewed the convergence of historical movements in knowledge with the conditions for critical reflection. In the following, we unfold how the depth and surface distinction can function as an analytical concept to interfere with and change not only discourses and definitional processes but real problems in real societies.

The definition and understanding of what social problems are and how to address them adequately is a crucial foundation in the development and knowledge base of social work. Critical reflection is present in different theoretical traditions with various methodological positions. For postmodernists, the regular order of life is related to both knowledge and power dynamics. Power is in Foucault's (1982) words: "always already there." One is never "outside" it; there are no "margins" for those who break with the system to gambol in'. There is a range of settings where social workers choose to believe that they can displace their power by adopting a consultative approach or a more motivating communication with the clients. But is it that simple? Based on the above theoretical and scientific review of changing epistemological interests, the answer would be no. Not only because of the all-encompassing discursive nature of power, as poststructuralism would argue, but because the time has come for research to move beyond questions on *how* truth and knowledge are epistemologically *created*, negotiated, reshaped, and produced in networks in the contexts in which people participate. Research must *also* uncover the unequal mechanisms and developments in society that create real problems, unhappiness, exclusion, or the opposite, happiness and well-being. Hereby, there is a call to '*move beyond social constructionism by reimagining social problems, human marginalisation and suffering in the real context of capitalist class contradictions and the actually existing struggles underway to transform and transcend them*' (Dello Buono, 2013)

The concept of 'reflection' is widely used in our everyday language, adding the concept 'critical' makes the reflection deeper and more profound. Reflection is not, by definition, critical. It is quite possible to be reflective, staying 'at the surface' while focusing solely on processes, methods practices, and negotiations in practice, leaving unquestioned the criteria for such procedures, making a set of practices smoother, and achieving the goals intended. But this is not critical reflection in the point of view of this chapter. Critical reflection calls into question the forms of knowledge used in education, methods, practices, problem definitions, welfare, and the struggles embedded within them. Critical reflection calls into question the power relations that promote a set of implicit or explicit rules

and as we will argue, critical reflection can point towards marginalised, alternative, or directly oppositional politics and culture in society. But to be able to move beyond a critical deconstruction of existing power-knowledge hierarchies and relations, reconstruction of alternatives is needed. For that purpose, we have suggested a realistic ground and a more inclusive metatheory for both research and practice that goes beyond positivism, empiricism, and constructivism. Such metatheory should be open to a wide range of integrative methods and theories and a methodological openness towards different analytical perspectives that moves *beneath the surface* of social phenomena. An example of this analytical perspective is the concept of ‘holistic’. This concept is used in a range of settings and situations in social work practice and governance. It is a widespread understanding that it is possible to work holistically on the surface by keeping an eye on the treatment of the individual client through training programs, cognitive skills training, social network programs, and so on (Nissen, Fallov, & Ringø, 2018). All initiatives move holistically symptomatically *around* the client on the surface, without any in-depth focus on revealing and changing the structures and mechanisms that produced inequality, suffering, marginalisation, and social problems in the first place and maybe continually produce and reproduce the problem for thousands of people to come after. The symptomatic treatment of the high increase of vulnerability, suffering, and psychiatric diagnoses as depression and anxiety among young people on a global scale is a good example of a one-eyed approach to this. While the treatment is based on psychiatric categorisation, manual-based treatment, and often therapeutic practices, the structural, cultural, societal conditions, and mechanisms producing the situation are left unsolved, and it is never clear whether the observed phenomena are expressions of underlying mechanisms on different levels.

A quite concrete methodological way forward on this issue is to develop a metatheoretical scientific approach that allows the combination of different scientific perspectives and includes critical reflection on marginalised or excluded knowledge. Not as another focus on multi-disciplinary ‘holistic’ *practices* but with the point of departure to develop ‘holistic’ knowledge about *social problems* that capture the complexity of human and social life. Social life is a complex situational phenomenon that emerges in an interplay with neurological, biological, material, socio-structural, social, and subjective generative mechanisms. There are different methodological approaches to uncovering this complexity. Critical realism offers one promising philosophical tradition with an explicit focus on the multi-layered stratified intransitive reality behind the observable surface of social phenomena (see also Juul and Ringø in this book). According to critical realism generative mechanisms exist at different strata (e.g., biological, psychological, social, and societal) (Bhaskar, 1989; Danermark, 2002). In real life, mechanisms from different strata

most certainly interact, and there is a knowledge-gab and need to develop integrative metatheories and models that can capture this interactive effect (Ringø, 2013b).

Despite focusing on uncovering the depth in the methodological and the theoretical understanding of social problems, revitalising an ontological depth as an analytical tool for critical reflection advances human capacity to provide knowledge about mechanisms working behind our backs producing and reproducing unequal structures, suffering, and difficult life situations. The collective agency has the capacity to overcome and even change these deep structures in contemporary civilisations if there is a knowledge ground for such collective actions.

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