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Editorial

The European Journal of Social Education enters its eleventh year in periodical volume. There are many familiar aspects in this issue, however there is one significant difference this time as we are responding to changing patterns by publishing this issue in an electronic format. It is hoped that this will make it more accessible to a wider readership.

Articles in this issue are partly commented through a blind peer reviewing system. This new practice has produced an excellent document and strengthened the whole editing process of the journal. The usual sections are represented here, namely Focus on Training, Target Groups, Social Politics and Book Review. In coming issues authors are invited and persuaded to reflect yet more the diversity of social pedagogical approaches and theoretical thinking in Europe to promote and strengthen socio educational practices. To raise the profile of the Journal further, the journal will offer to authors a possibility to get blind feedback and comments from well-known and recommended researchers and professors to develop further their articles. We are very grateful to all reviewers this time who were hard-working and diligent. We would also like to thank president Inge Danielsen and the editorial board Reidar S. Österhaus and Christer Cederlund, Paola Richard-De Paolis, Jean-Marie Heydt and Francois Gillet whose advice and help has been invaluable.

Our most recent gathering was with the full ENSACT group in Dubrovnik in April 2009, where we had an interesting conference with over 40 sessions and workshops in the theme Different Legacies & Common Challenges. Our FESET seminar in Osnabruck in April 2010 will be the occasion for the launch of this issue No. 18/19, and we look forward to the next gathering which will be at Brussels in 2011 with ENSACT. The next issue of the journal will especially welcome papers from the Osnabruck seminar, which theme Social pedagogical approaches in social pro-
fessions, will no doubt produce many interesting and thought-provoking items. Any papers which are presented at these gatherings are welcome to be submitted for the journal.

We also have our re-vamped website. It is our sincere hope that FESET members and all who are interested will use the on-line journal and the FESET website to build stronger networks and to encourage new members to join in this enrichment.

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Development ecology in German social work

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Abstract
This study highlights how a profession acquires knowledge in the context of the German welfare state. This is achieved by studying the organisation, transformation and sphere of influence of social work in Germany. The theoretic frame of reference is provided by a modification of Bronfenbrenner's model of developmental ecology. If we view Social work as an action-oriented discipline, then both action and intervention are essential elements. Social work can thus be said to contain five different levels of intervention. This study is focusing the meso-social level and the exo-social level. The main result of this article leads us to a paradox and a professional dilemma. The social worker's freedom and power within their own profession, a professional empowerment, can be said to be more conditional, where, whilst creativity has been stimulated, these are acceptable only within the boundaries defined by the newly created civil structures and interest groups.

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Introduction

During a period of time in 1988 I was studying in the former German Democratic Republic. Having a variety of work experience in different organizations in Sweden, Germany and the Baltic countries together with an academic position within the department of Social work at Malmö University, this background has inspired me to write this article from an outside (Swedish) perspective. I have got my educational background in Education, Economics and Political science and this article is written in order to complete my doctoral thesis as it is a continuation of my licentiate thesis (Christensen, 2007) focusing transformation and space of action in a societal context. The overall theme of my doctoral thesis is a result of my interest in education focusing profession and human service organisations. This paper addresses the question: “In the meeting between different organisations, what factors influence social work professions’ knowledge acquisition and learning processes?” The empirical base consists of interviews, seminars and lectures and meetings with relevant academics and professional social workers in Germany. The study’s geographical focus is related to three different regions in Germany: Berlin, Osnabrück and Frankfurt a.M. The main result of this article leads us to a paradox and a professional dilemma. The social workers’ freedom and power within their own profession, a professional empowerment, can be said to be more conditional, where, whilst creativity has been stimulated, these are acceptable only within the boundaries defined by the newly created civil structures and interest groups.

Development Ecology and Social work

The study’s theoretical frame of reference is to be found within developmental ecology, founded by Bronfenbrenner (1979). According to Bronfenbrenner’s theory, everything is inter-related and interacts with one another, but to varying degrees and at different times. His theory focuses on relationships, both between people but also between the different systems, which our lives and our world are made up of. Bronfenbrenner maintains that the individual always develops within a context and his theory covers the whole of this context even though this standpoint has been criticised by Paquette & Ryan (2001). They think that the individual needs to be seen primarily for it’s individual conditions and focus on the ability to influence his or her own success, before studying the surrounding context and it’s levels. The choice of developmental ecology as a frame of reference can be motivated by the fact that Bronfenbrenner divides this context into different levels, which act
upon and interact with the individual and influence his or her development. In order to understand the individual's development within its context, the study should not only include this individual and his or her specific environment, but also the individual in his or her relation to the general environment. Bronfenbrenner's focuses on the individual's drive and ability to influence in relationship to their specific environment and not that strongly on the individual's sphere of influence on an organisational, societal as well as a global level. In order to better understand the complex inter-relationship between the individual and society, Bronfenbrenner developed his model of developmental ecology, which consists of four systems, each of which operate at different levels: from micro (the most specific) up through meso, exo to macro (the most general). In order to understand an individual, it isn't enough just to describe him or her in the context of their family (micro context); we must also take into account how the various systems interact with the individual and with one another (meso-context). The macro system is then crucial to placing this analysis within the context of daily living.

**A fifth level in addition to the four system levels**

In addition to the four system levels, time is also an important factor in the developmental ecological perspective. Both the individual and the environment change over time and Bronfenbrenner maintains that these changes are crucial to our understanding of how the different systems influence the individual and his or her development. Bronfenbrenner's model does not feature what can be interpreted as an international level, an important factor with reference to the all-pervasive force of globalisation, and as a result I feel that it is important to refer also to Drakenberg's (2004) study where she complements Bronfenbrenner's model with a fifth level, an ex-macro level.

**Social work and intervention**

If we view Social work as an action-oriented discipline, then both action and intervention are essential elements of social work's identity. Social work can thus be said to contain five different levels of intervention; the micro-social level (person, client, focus on interaction), the meso-social level (group, institution, coherence), the exo-social level (society, institutions, educational system), the macro-social level (culture, nation, traditions, language) and the ex-macro-social level (international relations, EU and immigrants from all over the world). This study is focusing the meso-social level and the exo-social level.
Method

The research is founded on one-to-one interviews conducted in 2007 until 2009 with academic teachers, social-work students, practitioners and decision-makers. It has been essential for me having input from people coming from different areas of Social work. They represent a wide range of organisations such as academic institutions, research institutes, social-services, public and private and treatment centres in three different geographical regions in Germany (Berlin, Osnabrück and Frankfurt a.M) which I have done on purpose as they are references to each other. In addition to this, other sources have been added to the interviews; lecturers and seminars where interaction in various senses has been taken place and also study-visits have been implemented. The author has a wide academic experience of working in a German context and speaks the German language fluently.

Sample and data collection instrument

Following a semi-structured open-ended interview guide, nineteen respondents (seven female and twelve male) were asked questions about their work life and the profession of social work. All interviews took place without any other person around except from me and the respondent in a (for the respondent) well known working environment. Each interview took about one and a half hour. Step by step I have tried to become familiar with the data by reading it all through. With regard to professional factors that impact on Social work, respondents were specially asked: What does Quality mean for you? What does control and the principles of subsidiarity mean for the Professionalization of Social work? What does freedom of space and loyalty mean in sense of organizational context? Interviews were digitally recorded in German and after that translated and transcribed into English, finally a thematic content-analysis (Neuendorf, 2002) was carried out which follows the process according to Neuendorf (2002) where the whole text is gone through several times and the content is then examined whereafter meanings and phrases which are relevant for the questions are identified. Those meanings and phrases are mentioned content-based units. These are conceptualized in order to shorten the text but still keep the content. Thereafter, the central message is identified and stands for the actual content, finally certain themes are formulated.

Analysis of data

I have seen every interview as a single unit even though a comparison has been made. When respondents have given different opinions about the same aspect/key-word, I have chosen not to neglect the differences, instead I have seen these
differences as a resource and together with other empirical sources such as given seminars examined these differences in class-room situations and come to my own conclusions. After that I have gone back to the interviews and verified the content or not verified. I have then stressed what I have found central. I have done the same validation with what has been said in the seminars. I have finally found a number of substantial themes and clues which have been verified both in interviews and class-room situations. After that, in my analysis, I have looked upon themes-clues and asked myself: Could it really be like this? What is this about? What does it stand for? Is it a creative process? What in this material is interesting and exciting? Then I have identified connections, patterns and typologies in the material and finally formulated connections, patterns and typologies into conception which describes a part of or the whole of the phenomenon I have chosen to study. Codified Quotations have been used as support for statements. The quotations relate to four different groups of respondents where the number of men and women varied in each group: Academic institution (group A, in total nine, three women), Field of practice except from an authority (group B, in total six, two women), Authority/Public Institution (group C, in total two, one woman) and Expert organisation (group D, in total two, one woman). In some cases, a respondent represents two groups, for example one respondent who is both representing group A and D.

Reliability and validity

How can I be sure that I am measuring what I would like to measure? According to Silverman (from Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2008), I have controlled the reliability by having a rather highly structured interview-guide, with basically the same format and sequence of words and questions for each respondent. As the variety of respondents is rather wide, I have seen the importance of open-ended interviews as this enables respondents to demonstrate their unique way of looking at the world – their definition of the situation. In addition to the interviews, I have used lectures and seminars as a validation tool, meaning that what has been delivered from the interviews in sense of key-messages, I have raised, discussed and confronted with students in class-room situations, for example in A1. I have then gone back to the content of the interviews which has been confirmed. This has then become a way of verifying the interviews. By using study-visits, I have observed some of the statements being made in interviews and therefore used study-visits as a complementary tool for validity in the same way as I have done with the lectures and seminars, for example in B2. One way of validating interview measures is to compare the interview measure with another measure that has already been shown to be valid (Cohen, Manion, Morrison, 2008). These other measures are
in this study represented by seminars and study-visits. The opinions and meanings of what the interviews show cannot fully be understood by myself, instead it must be put in relation to the context whereby of which the respondent is a part. The analysis made by me is therefore no attempt to explain but rather to describe how the individual experiences, analyses and understands his or her surrounding world. The analysis therefore shows how individuals understand a certain reality. According to Alvesson and Sköldberg (1994) it is not the amount of statements done that are interesting, rather the content of what has been said and what in fact has been said.

Findings

Sphere of influence

Social work is performed in the meeting between, with and through individuals, where the social worker is active within different societal and organisational contexts, where the interplay between the different levels within the organisation and between organisations in turn influences the sphere of influence available to the social worker. If we then relate social work to an interrelation between the social worker and the organisation’s mission, then the work done can be given different values depending on how the organisation and its professional workers understand and interpret their role.

“‘There are several opportunities for the clients to choose and empowerment is a precondition therefore’” (A1)

Depending on the social worker’s organisational context, he or she has different levels of freedoms in the conduction of their roles. Sphere of influence in its nature refers to the possibility of choice but also to a professional’s decision not to choose. The organisational sphere of influence is created in the interplay between the professional and the organisation, both horizontally and vertically.

“‘I look upon the Welfare-associations as if they were my colleagues and we should always learn from each other and integrate the best we can’” (C1)

“‘You could speak about horizontal integration but vertical sligg (asymmetric) and in the elderly-care sector, the public has very little influence and the client has got the right on veto’” (A2)
The view that humans develop through their interaction with others is so well established that older explanatory models based around evolutionary psychology in many cases have been replaced by ecological system theory or developmental ecological theory (Paquette & Ryan, 2001).

"The welfare associations are working very close to the clients" (A3)

"I do see a risk for bureaucratization and too many decisions made on regional basis" (A4)

Power should be seen as diversified and the decision-making process is to say the least, complicated. As is the case in, for example, care of the elderly there are many different organisations involved in and centred around the individual.

"There is unfortunately not, no consensus in Germany when it comes to how to measure the quality of social-service. This together with a lack of competence in social-work among civil-servants dealing with the finance and its distribution of resources too much lack of understanding between professional Social-workers and decision makers, in fact, a common language is missing" (AD5)

"Development of standardization processes through the ISO-standard is one part of our quality measurement" (B1)

The individual's self-interest versus societal interests and the relationship between the two is thus of central importance. The professional sphere of influence changes in line to the changes that civil society is undergoing, and thus as civil society becomes more empowered, the sphere of influence available to the social worker is changing; whereas simultaneously social work moves closer to the client and the individual has both greater influence and choice.

"As the welfare associations are becoming more dependant on financial support from the public, space of freedom in acting is decreasing, and decisions are made more and more on a local level" (B2)

"Of course, we can say that there is a high degree of space of freedom for the Social worker, but as new actors are coming this space is diminishing due to the fact that evaluation is done with quantitative methods" (AB6)

Basically, however, there has been little change in how the social worker interacts with the client, regardless of which organisation the social worker represents. The most important social work is not done within administrations, but rather out in the
field. Civil society is undergoing a significant period of change, where, for example, the role of the family is changing. One of the consequences of civil society’s increased burden of responsibility is that the interaction between the different levels has changed. The social worker has become more dependent on the different social networks and the fact that society expects these networks to be stimulated from below.

"The importance of developing network in Social work can not be underestimated" (A7)

Thus professional freedom and power can be seen to be more conditional; where there is a greater expectation of creative thinking and Social innovation and entrepreneurship, but also creative thinking and entrepreneurship which must deal with new civil structures and interests. Parallel to this process, local power is also influenced through the fact that the role of the different actors in the welfare associations changes in relation to both civil society and the individual.

"Even though professionalization in Social work is increasing, pre-conditions for its fulfilment is decreasing, this gives more frustration to the Social worker" (B2)

The welfare societies have experienced an increase in competition from both private companies and emerging ‘social’ interest groups and one of the ways for the welfare societies to meet this increasing competition has been to establish independent social organisations ("Soziale GmbH") that operate on a local level under the umbrella of the welfare societies.

"Our challenge is to both keep and encourage our network and at the same time point out the added value which we transfer towards the authorities and our clients, one way of facing the competition is to establish new Social companies (B3)"

The fact that entrepreneurs start-up these social organisations can be seen both as a challenge (creative thinking versus established structures) as well as an opportunity for the welfare societies (which have varying geographic market positions) to develop and increase their sphere of influence. The impact of this on the professional development of social work is probably one of the contributing factors as to why the state on the macro-level (federal level) has seen a clear need for increased regulation. As one respondent says:
"There is a strong tendency towards more standardization and at the same time also a lack of relevant measure instruments which gives a situation where the lack of understanding between authorities and their competence in relation to the professional understanding in the field of what Social work stands for is becoming more obvious" (AD5)

As a consequence a so called “Economization” can be seen in sense of more cost-control, measurement of quality and development of methods (esp. quantitative). If this is negative or not can be described from one respondent:

“For me, control is not negative. I think it is very positive, somebody is always there for you, in social-service. I think it is essential and I do not see this as a problem and quality-standards as well as process-standards are essential” (C1)

Professional identity and recognition in the society and civil society

At the same time as social work is changing as a result of economic forces (for example, that quality assurance is conducted by quantitative methods) there exists a dilemma. The social worker’s sphere of influence increases as society transfer resources and influence over to civil society; but this in turn creates new power structures, which in turn create new problems. Therefore, the social worker can be seen as part of a professional system (Hoffer & Piontkowski, 2007) based on their experience of their own profession; its codes, values, attitudes, social properties (including economic, ecological and cultural properties) and biological properties but also a part of a non-professional system.

"The relatively high status and reputation which social-workers have in e.g. Sweden compared to Germany is based on monolithic power in my opinion (A1)"

A greater focus on civil society stimulates creativity and entrepreneurship at the same time as a moral dilemma arises in the meeting between the economic aspects and the degree of professionalization. One of the consequences of this dilemma is that the interplay between the micro and the meso-level has changed. Social workers have moved closer to the client, become more empowered and independent at the same time as the state and welfare societies spheres of influence have diminished.
"In my opinion, without having had such close connection to the social worker and the relationship we have built up where we could in deep speak about emotions, I would not have had the possibility of coming back to life, I have had several chances and it was first after the 5th trial I went back to life. I have always been seen as the person I am, not a drug-addicted, not a criminal and not convicted in advance" (B4)

The sphere of influence for the individual social worker has increased at the same time as new patterns of interest groups have been created. An individual behaviour or way of thinking can contribute to mutual learning via interaction (Kraus, 2007).

"It is essential having an open-minded view on new methods and the connection to research, for example when it comes to how to deal with religious issues, then we need closer cooperation with the research-field" (A8)

The social worker's ability to interpret their sphere of influence can thus be deduced from the contextual level of freedom or lack of freedom that the social worker experiences in light of the relationships that he or she has, both horizontally and vertically.

"In my opinion, people should control their own and that it also should be in that way, my professional challenge is therefore to figure out how I can make alternatives attractive for people, they have their own space of activity within the frame which I have decided" (B2)

Their definition of their own sphere of influence is affected both by these dimensions and by the development of a more entrepreneurial approach towards interventions and support (Light, 2008).

"Openness and having an open-minded cooperative-view towards private actors is a pre-condition as a variety of treatment-alternatives for the client is important" (A9)

Discussion

Societal demand on control, measurement and influence is challenging traditional structures. This transformation process gives both new opportunities and problems for Social workers professional development. Factors that are crucial and essential for every organization to take care of in order to stimulate and develop
Social workers’ professional competence are the ability of the organization to give enough space of activity, control, the individual’s own potential of social networking both within and without the organization and recognition. Social work and its representing organizations in the world is acting as a part of a knowledge-system on individual and organisational level where the market and society interact with each-other.

Social work in Germany is very much characterized by this. The society through its authorities on different levels have their legislative frames, function of control and evaluation. Social workers have to take care of their own professional identity and deal with their relations towards clients and the organizational frame. This gives especially the exo-social level and the meso-social level a key-role (see Bronfenbrenner, 1979). When the organization has the potential to look upon the importance of having self-thinking and active collaborators, the professional development will be stimulated. It seems that a key-factor in Germany is an open-minded view on how to both cooperate and compete (co-opetition) and the opinion that client should have alternatives is more or less taken for granted. This means that ties between the social worker’s profession and client content both social, legislative and market (commercial, competitive) factors. Co-opetition is the link between freedom of acting for social workers and the limitation of the same within present structures. This co-opetition lies both on a professional, individual as well as organizational and societal level. Therefore it can be said that the experienced dependence or independence which social workers feel towards their organizations and society are of great importance when looking upon knowledge acquisition and learning processes. The social worker’s ability to define his or her professional sphere of influence is defined in relation to the contextual level of freedom or lack of freedom that the social worker experiences in the relationships that he or she has, both horizontally and vertically within their organisational environment. Cooperation on an individual, professional meso-social level and competition between organisations (Co-opetition) on the exo-social level seem to be key-factors in knowledge development.

I can see that the professional sphere of influence is changing parallel to the changes that civil society is undergoing; and as civil society becomes increasingly empowered, the status of the social worker is decreasing, whilst simultaneously the social worker has become closer to the client and has greater independence. One of the consequences of a ‘more’ civil society is that the ‘game’ between the micro and meso-levels has changed. The social worker’s sphere of influence and empowerment is strengthened from the development which can be seen in the
civil society where they need to rely more on social networks, on the other hand this sphere of influence is reduced and professional empowerment is not strengthened due to a tendency where more political governance and economization is taken place. This leads us to a paradox and a professional dilemma. The social workers’ freedom and power within their own profession, a professional empowerment, can therefore be said to be more conditional, where, whilst creativity has been stimulated, these are acceptable only within the boundaries defined by the newly created civil structures and interest groups. Some social-workers have the ability to handle this dilemma very well, they have a capacity as it helps them to find a professional strength in adverse circumstances, for example an individual’s capacity to withstand stressors in the organisation. An increased demand for new knowledge within the local authorities and challenges for the process of implementation, non-conditional action-space for individual social-workers, stimulation of co-opetition between organisations and professional empowerment will be essential in this transformation.

What levels and ties need to be further understood? How can the individual be seen in a context of network? Can entrepreneurship deepen our way of looking upon individual’s potential in a learning process? These questions are raised in this study in order to be continued.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES


