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## Exploring knowledge in Social Work - Theoretical Models in Practice

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## Exploring Knowledge in Social Work – Theoretical Models in Practice

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## *Introduction*

Knowledge in social work has been highlighted during the last years, as social work has become more of an academic profession in many countries. Still there is a gap between academic research and the practice of social work. Social workers try to find solutions in order to be more effective in their work, while researches try to understand and explain practice and its context. Sometimes academic understanding is implemented in practice, sometimes it is regarded as a superstructure far from practice.

The knowledge base for social work has been questioned and evidence based practice has been demanded from researchers, decision-makers and others. The answer from some social workers has been that social work always has been based on knowledge, but all forms of knowledge are not possible to quantify. In this kind of discussions a lot of aspects are being taken for granted. The discussants sometimes seem to presuppose that knowledge is a fixed phenomenon, an object that can be used or not used.

This way of discussing knowledge leads to a point where we compare who has the most or the best knowledge. Instead, we argue, we should unpack the concept knowledge and look in to what kind of knowledge we are talking about, and what kind of knowledge we are using in practice. In order to do that, we have a model for different kinds of knowledge that we have used in discussions with social workers. In this presentation we will explain both the model and how we have worked with it. Before we explain the models and how we have used them we have to give a frame for this use and a picture of how we regard social workers work, role and discretion.

### *Situational work*

Social workers are employed in or engaged by organisations. Social work is basically organised work with social and personal problems (Lundström and Sunesson 2000). Thereby, the social worker is an actor for an organisation. An organisation can not act; the actors are the persons that act for the organisation (Ahrne 1999). In everyday social work, social workers meet people. These meetings are meetings between persons with history, future and context, but they are asymmetric meetings where the social worker comes in to the situation as a representative for an organisation while the person that are to be helped only represents him or her self.

The sociologist Randall Collins (2004) argues that it is the situation that creates the actors. The situation consists of specific actions and specific expectations. When persons are in a situation their roles are formed by the task, the reason for their meeting and their expectations. It is also formed by external factors in the context, such as, in this case, the organisational setting. Collins says that the more formalised the setting is, the more categorical the roles of the actors become. In the situation the persons act in their categorical roles as given by the context.

Even if it is the context that gives them their roles, they interpret their roles differently according to their experiences of similar situations. Every person is given discretion in the situation, thereby, they become actors in the situation and the possible actions are controlled by the situation. The interaction between the parties is thou not given, since each one of them chooses between possible actions. The references used to make the choice is the person's experience from earlier, similar interaction and expectations of what will happen that comes from these experiences.

For a social worker to understand her/his work, and why she/he chooses certain actions, she/he has to be aware of the setting and the expectations she/he has. Since social work is based in some kind of knowledge, a way of exploring the expectations is to focus their knowledge base. Since social work is situational, this is best done by using concrete situations. It could be actual situations they have experienced, but it could also be simulated cases that are created to expose certain aspects.

### *Workshops*

One way to work with progression in knowledge-based social work is in workshops with a small group of practitioners. We have used a specific pedagogic model, which has its roots from workshops where researchers and practitioners meet to discuss a specific theme or subject. In Sweden we call them “research – circle - groups”. The aim of this model is through co-operation and dialogue, between researchers and practitioners create and develop new methods for exploring knowledge in social work. The pedagogic idea about research-circle-groups is that people gather around a topic or theme, that they want to know more about. It is an arena for researchers and practitioners where the focused theme shall be discussed and elucidated (Johnsson et. al 2005). By the group members' different kinds of experiences and knowledge, something new is created.

We have in these workshops used vignettes to be able to grasp the group members' different kind of knowledge and values about their work. This is a pedagogic method, which has been used in several studies on social workers knowledge and skill (Sheppard et.al 2000, Munro 2002). It is also a method used in studies about peoples' values about specific topics. A vignette is a short story

that describes a person, situation or process, which has been marked with characteristics by the researcher to enlighten the judgement of the situation (Jergeby 1999).

The groups have consisted of 6-8 members from the social services, one group-leader (often a researcher) and one person who had documented the discussions. Each group met at three to five occasions. There have been a variety of themes, for example ethics in social work, the use of attachment theory in social work with children and family, user-involvement or new methods in the work with disabled people. Each group has started with a lecture and discussion about different kind of knowledge in social work referring to the model described above. By this we have tried to minimize the gap between research and practice. The group has then focused on its specific theme, relating it to what kind of knowledge used in their work.

### *Method*

In order to discuss the knowledge in social work practice, we use models. Using models as pedagogical tools gives a mutual understanding; it highlights aspects and gives the opportunity to create a mutual base for the discussion. The model becomes an instrument and shapes the thoughts of the persons involved. Bruno Latour (1987) argues that when we are in a specific context, we do not need to explain thoroughly, as there is a lot of understanding implicit in the context. So – when we are to discuss social work with social workers, we have to regard the implicit understandings. When we do that, we have to make the implicit visible and therefore we work with models that form a mutual and explicit understanding and that also helps the social workers to acknowledge other forms of understanding than they normally do. This became obvious when we in, the discussions about knowledge in social work practice, came in to discussions about the prerequisites for social work in different organisational settings. Here

another model was used, and by that we could highlight the specific role and the personal expectations of the social worker. This model will be presented later. We will show how the two models together give the opportunity to focus social workers discretion based on the organisational setting, the personal expectations and the available knowledge. Since this is done in a specific form of workshop, we have to describe the setting.

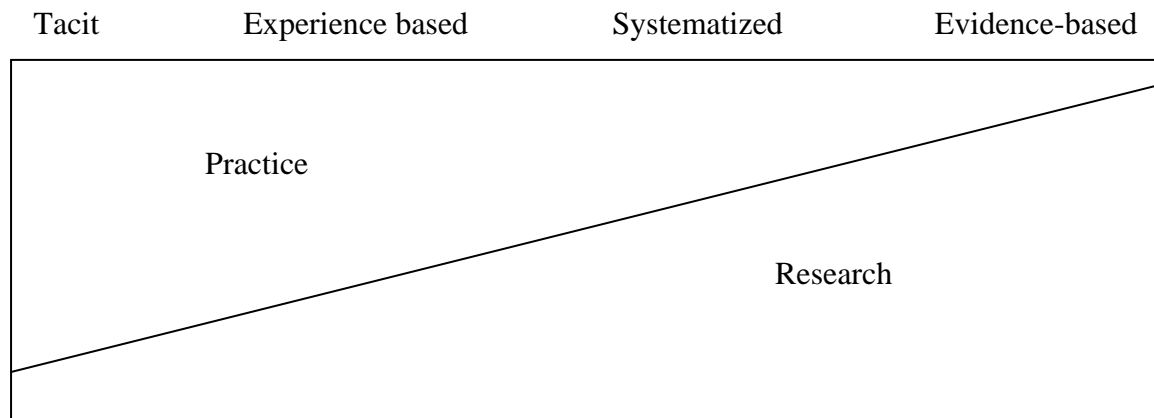
### *A model for social work knowledge*

When we are exploring knowledge, we have to acknowledge the variation in how knowledge is conceptualised. Knowledge has been explored and conceptualised in many different ways. Two extremes in the contemporary debate are relativism and reductionism. In relativism everything is more or less possible and we have to regard details and understanding in every specific moment. In reductionism everything has to be measurable and possible to generalise. Between these two extremes most of social work research and practice is carried out and it could be discussed if the work done is evidence-based or if it is based on reflection (see Gambrill 1999, Schön 1983). In evidence-based social work the idea is that social work should be based on verbalised and systematised scientific knowledge and methods and in reflective social work knowledge comes from experience.

Instead of taking stand and argue for the one or the other aspect, we take a step out from this discussion and look at it with a more distant perspective by going to our first model.

## Model 1. The multifaceted field of knowledge in social work practice

### Shapes of knowledge



Source: Johnsson, E and Svensson K (2005) Theory in social work – some reflections on understanding and explaining interventions. *European Journal of Social Work*. Vol. 8, No. 4, December 2005, pp. 419-433

This model aims to clarify how we combine knowledge from both research and practice in all kinds of knowledge in social work. No matter how practice-based the knowledge is, a small part of research results helps to sort impressions. We can not think of a situation totally without impact of research results, since we are influenced by education, newspapers and other media, and even in discussions between friends, results from research come about. On the other hand, no situation can be totally research-based, in order to be social work, there has to be aspects of action. Even if these actions are taken from a manual that tells you how to act, there is always a part of the action that is influenced by the fact that we are human. It could be how the actors look at each other, the tone of the voice or other subtle nuances.



If we then start from the left, we have *tacit knowledge*, a form where practice has an obvious dominance. Tacit knowledge is widely used and discussed in social work. The concept was coined by Michael Polanyi (1967) and covers knowledge that can not be expressed. Therefore it can not be taught, it has to grow by experience, in learning-by-doing. Since it is not expressible we are not really aware of it, but we have some kind of feeling that there is something beyond formal knowledge and instructions given. This “something” is personal and can not be shared. Some prefer the term intuition, other use terms like procedural knowledge (Bunge 2001, Nielsen 2002). Regardless of the terminology, this is the kind of knowledge that is used when we improvise and find solutions that seem appropriate in the specific situation. A lot of human actions are improvisations, Charles Tilly (1999) means that improvisations are so frequent that our social structure should be regarded as maintained by improvisations.

When we move to the right in the model we enter the expressible personal knowledge, the experience-based. Here we can present stories about our experiences and about person’s lives. To be experienced is to have a practical knowledge that can be transferred between situations. This is what happens when we argue that we are doing it this way because it usually works out fine. Experience is transferred through stories, and stories about situations in social work are frequent both in practice and in education. Storytelling is an essential part of social work (Carew 1979, Parton 1999). Social workers often express a form of “naïve theory”, theories that are not consciously based on scientific methods and results (Olsson and Ljunghill 1997). These theories derive from stories told by the social worker or her colleagues and they are built by a mutual, practice-based understanding, interpreted in a frame of research that has reach them in education, conferences and so on. If we add experiences from different social workers and make them more systemised, then we move one more step to

the right in the model. We then reach an understanding that no longer is personal, it is a collective knowledge that can be shared and discussed. In order to understand what these stories reflect, we have to use research methods for systematisation. Thereby, we add more research and less practice to the picture and we get a knowledge that is formed by the research's concepts and models.

Finally, when we reach the right end of the model, we find a knowledge that is dominated by research, the evidence-based knowledge. Here it is not only knowledge that is formed by research, but also social work practice. In an evidence-based practice results from earlier studies makes the base for the actions taken today. The idea of evidence-based social work is to minimise the gap between research, policy and practice (Eweritt 2002). Usually, evidence-based work is carried out with the base in manuals that are formed by earlier research (Gambrill 1999). This way, the personal and practical aspects become small and knowledge formed through research dominates the picture. As well as the other extreme, the tacit knowledge, is questioned and discussed, evidence-based knowledge is. Representatives for different kinds of knowledge have their argument, and of course the extremes can not agree. Here it is thou not a question of discussion the best form of knowledge, the issue is to acknowledge that we use all of these forms of knowledge in social work. In different settings, different forms are used.

### *Forms of social work*

As the workshops continued, over and over again questions on organisational matters and on the idea of social work came up. The participants discussed their role and task. As the model of knowledge, above, had worked fine for those discussion, a model for forms of social work were taken in to the discussions. This model derives from a project where social work with crime victims was studied. In order to understand if these actions taken were to be called social work, a model was used and we took that model in to the workshops. Although all of the participants agreed that the social services where doing social work, the form of social work was not clarified, neither were the expectations from the social workers.

#### **Model 2: Forms of social work**

<b>Form</b>	<b>Focus</b>	<b>Idea</b>	<b>The helper</b>	<b>The needy person</b>
Self help group	The problem	To do something	Participant	Participant
Treatment	The method	To do the best thing	Expert	Client
Philanthropy	The helper	To do a good thing	Donor	Recipient
Bureaucracy	The organisation	To do the right thing	Civil servant	Citizen

Source: Kerstin Svensson (2002) *BROTTSOFFERJOURER OCH STÖDPERSONER. En kartläggning av Brottsofferjourerna i Sverige 2002*, Meddelande från Socialhögskolan nr 2, Lund: Lunds universitet

This model shows that the focus and the idea in the specific form give different roles to the helper and the helped. As Randall Collins (2004) has pointed out, the role and the discretion are given in the specific situation. The self help group are built on a common ground of experience, all participants in the group have similar experiences and the group gives opportunity to exchange experiences. No specific method, education or skill is required, since the main idea is to do something. When it comes to treatment, the helper is regarded as an expert and is expected to do the best thing with the best method, this is why the person in need has chosen this treatment. In the philanthropic form of social work, the helper is in focus, and the main thing for the helper is to do good things. Thereby, the relationship between the helper and the help becomes based on a gift-thinking, where the helper is a donor that gives the help to the recipient that is supposed to be grateful. Finally, we have the bureaucratic form, where the most important is to do the legally right thing, the organisation is arranged so that it should be possible and the helper is employed as a civil servant in order to give the citizens what they have the right to have.

When this model was presented for the first time, one form after the other was shown. The participants in the workshop considered the different forms and roles one by one. They argued about them and did not really find a match with their own work. Until we came to the last one. Then the participating social workers realized what their role and position were. They were employed as civil servants and their role was to assess and match citizens with the possible interventions and offers. Looking back at the other forms of social work, they discussed that their expectations of their role maybe where more of the

philanthropic form, or treatment, and some even had the idea that the best would be to have experiences that could be shared with the clients.

When this model was presented in a workshop with managers, it was obvious that their form of social work was the bureaucratic. They did not at all discuss the other forms. The use of the model highlighted the discrepancy between doing social work and managing social work. The managers were quite sure about their role, while the social workers talked about an interest to be more than a civil servant in the relationship to the client. The social workers did not appreciate the model, since it gave them a picture of their role, and an understanding of why their knowledge not always is enough in helping their clients. Sometimes it is the organisational setting that makes it impossible to use the knowledge.

### *Practicing the model*

We will in this section give an example from one of the workshops. We met a group of five social workers that wanted to learn more about children's' needs in problematic social situations, so that they could do professional assessments and interventions. All of the social workers had worked at the social services for several years and had a lot of experience. In this workshop we used a book about attachment theory as a theoretical base to understand children's psychological development and needs. At the first workshop we talked about different kind of knowledge in social work and presented the first model, which was reflected upon. We then presented a vignette, which is as follows:

A young mother, Anna, lived with her three year old son, David, in an apartment. The day-care centre where David spends 6 hours a day had called the social services because they were worried about him. David was not happy, he did not play with the other children and it was sometimes difficult to reach him. He was often dirty and his clothes were not clean. In the last six months different persons had fetched him at the day-care centre. The staff did not know exactly what kind of relations these persons had to Anna or David. The staff had tried to talk to Anna, but she did not want to listen or she did not turn up to the appointments. IN the same period one of Anna's neighbours also called the social services. She was also worried about David because she had seen a lot of different men coming to the apartment and she suspected that Anna was using drugs. The neighbour told the social worker that David's father was using cannabis.

Following question was addressed to the social workers in the workshop: "*What do you think about the situation?*". The discussions were immediately focused on how to act upon the situation described in the vignette and there were almost no reflection of the situation. They "read" a lot of things in text that was not there. For example that the mother Anna surely was a drug addict, a fact that they knew would damage the child's psychological health. In the discussion, the social workers let their experiences and knowledge from other situations and their personal values ruled their way of thinking. This is a very common way to respond because social work in practice is very much to act. We then draw the attention to what was actually written in the vignette and asked the social workers to reflect about the situation. After that we talked about their personal values about motherhood. What is a good enough mother and how do my personal values influence my judgement? In this discussion we used the first model to highlight both tacit knowledge and experience-based knowledge.

While the social workers talked, we stopped them and asked: “*What kind of knowledge do you use when you say this?*”. Thereby we could highlight that some argument were based on values, some on facts. We could also show that some ideas were based on more systematic knowledge, while other was very personal.

In the third workshop, after having been asked, and having heard the question being put several times in the earlier workshops, one of the group members stopped telling the story she was about to tell and said “*And now you are going to ask me how I know that and what kind of knowledge I use to explain this, and I know, I have no argument. I could say that it is tacit knowledge, but it is wrong, it is not tacit, I just do not know how I know it*”.

This could be seen as a failure, either for the group member or for the idea of exploring knowledge this way. But it could also be seen as a success as we had come to the point where the group member had internalised a way of thinking about her expectations. Her statement shows that she now was aware of her way of thinking. The use of the model had pointed at a way of reflecting about her position, discretion and knowledge.

## *Discussion*

So far about 35 workshops (research-circle-groups) have been carried out with 420 members from the social services in a region in the south of Sweden. The themes in the groups have varied, but the pedagogic model has been the same. From the evaluations of the workshops one aspect has dominated, and that is that the participants points out the importance on reflection and consciousness on how different kind of knowledge influence their work. It is obvious that the second model, which contextualises the social work in the organisation, has been helpful to make the role as social worker clear and by that have realistic expectation on the possibilities to act. The model of different kind of knowledge in social work has minimised the gap between research and practice, and it creates a constructive dialog between the members in the group. What we have described here is a pedagogic model, where we have tried to integrate theoretical thinking in social work situation, to increase awareness about the work and to take a step further on to a professional social work. We also see this as a starting point and that this work can be further developed.



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