

SHORT VERSION · ENGLISH

Empiricism Evidence Empathy.♥

Nordic perspectives on knowledge development in social work

This is a summary of the anthology *Empiricism, Evidence, and Empathy – Nordic perspectives on knowledge development in social work* published by Nopus in 2005. The summary includes an introduction explaining the background to the project that resulted in this anthology, and a summary of developments in the Nordic countries. This is followed by highly abbreviated versions of the articles and a presentation of the authors.

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Empiricism, Evidence, Empathy

Nordic perspectives on knowledge development in social work
(Summary in English)

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Nordic co-operation

Nordic co-operation, one of the oldest and most wide-ranging regional partnerships in the world, involves Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, the Faroe Islands, Greenland and Åland. Co-operation reinforces the sense of Nordic community while respecting national differences and similarities, makes it possible to uphold Nordic interests in the world at large and promotes positive relations between neighbouring peoples.

Co-operation was formalised in 1952 when *the Nordic Council* was set up as a forum for parliamentarians and governments. The Helsinki Treaty of 1962 has formed the framework for Nordic partnership ever since. The *Nordic Council of Ministers* was set up in 1971 as the formal forum for co-operation between the governments of the Nordic countries and the political leadership of the autonomous areas, i.e. the Faroe Islands, Greenland and Åland.

Introduction

KNOWLEDGE as a strategic resource is currently high on the Nordic agenda in the social sciences.

The issues of how the social sector can be developed through research, and advances in knowledge and their implementation in practice are of current relevance in all the Nordic countries. There is a noticeable Nordic trend towards an emphasis on building up the existing competence and furthering knowledge in the social sciences. Strategic and organisational models vary from country to country, but an understanding of need to integrate knowledge and practice into new methods is common to all the Nordic countries.

The starting point for this anthology was the ongoing exchange of experience related to the national endeavours described in part one. The advancement of knowledge is, however, not a single simple clear concept, but a wide and multi-faceted one. This is underlined by the widely differing projects described in part two.

We hope this anthology will be of general interest to anyone interested in the social services, the development of knowledge, and the Nordic perspective. Presumptive readers include directors of social services, educational institutions, knowledge and development centres, R&D institutions, and many others.

We hope that this collection will contribute to spreading knowledge throughout the Nordic countries and stimulate readers to reflect on and discuss goals and methods for the provision of knowledge-based social services in a world that is subject to constant change.

The collection was written in collaboration between representatives of the National Board of Health and Welfare in Sweden, the Social and Health Ministry in Norway, the Social Services Board in Denmark and the Social and Health Ministry in Finland. The Nordic Council of Ministers contributed financial support.

The articles include descriptions of significant national initiatives in the sphere of knowledge development in the social services in the Nordic countries in recent years. There are also examples of local projects aimed at reinforcing the knowledge pool in local authority services. Additional perspectives are presented regarding important subjects for future discussion and analysis of the need for a stronger knowledge base for social work.

There are two parts to the collection. Part one contains overviews from each of the five Nordic countries. These make it clear that a series of initiatives with similar aims were taken at approximately the same time, but carried out in different ways. In all the countries, the process of societal development is being tackled in small steps; various projects are being carried out not only to rationalise, but also to improve welfare for the citizens.

But there are also interesting differences. In Sweden, for example, efforts have clearly concentrated on the knowledge produced through university and college research. These efforts have no equivalents in the other Nordic countries.

Part two brings into focus various questions such as: What part should the state play in knowledge development? How can increased integration between research and practice be encouraged? How can efforts be kept from ending up as merely temporary projects leading nowhere, and instead ensure that long-term structures are established?

In a concluding chapter, Bengt Börjeson reflects on various aspects of the concept of knowledge in the social work discipline, on the basis of the various contributions.

What are knowledge-based social services?

It is difficult to find anyone who objects to knowledge-based social services. But most people readily admit that there are shortcomings in knowledge and that measures to increase knowledge in social work are therefore welcomed. Still, the question of a knowledge base gives rise to strong feelings and the debate is at times stormy, at least in Sweden. The concept of *evidence-based social services* has particularly occasioned intensive discussions and Professor Sven-Axel Månsson at Göteborg University was among those who strongly opposed the idea, as reflected in a published article (Socionomen no. 8/2000). He felt that the concept of evidence-based practice was an import from the field of medicine with limited scope for capturing the complexity in the processes, relationships and conditions that characterise the content of social work.

In a collection of articles on knowledge development in the social services (*Perspectives on Knowledge Development Within the Social Services*, the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare 2003) one of the foremost advocates of the evidence concept in Sweden, Karin Tengvald

(head of the Institute for the Development of Methods in Social Work, IMS), develops the thinking around evidence-based practice. It is based on the notion that there may be working methods that are more generally applicable, resulting in a search for knowledge on a group level about the results of various working methods for clients. The basic questions are: *Which forms of measures/working methods are effective for which groups of clients/service users under what circumstances? And: Can we discover what types of measures are more or less effective than others and, if so, how?*

Another aspect that emerges in this anthology is the differing perspectives on the need for knowledge development. Kristian Tilander, Sweden, warns of the dangers of a one-dimensional concept of knowledge that only accepts knowledge based on scientific studies. In his opinion, good social work is largely a matter of having a positive view of people, trust, and a good ability to communicate. He maintains that it is necessary to create a working alliance between social worker and client, that social workers get a good introduction to their professional life during training, and that management is involved and secure. In her article, Merete Konnerup, Denmark, underlines the need for evaluation. She maintains that evidence-based policy and practice mean a systematic, clear and critical use of the best contemporary knowledge when making decisions about other people's welfare.

The articles in this collection should not be read as examples of conflicting points of view, but rather as complementary perspectives on what it is important to take into account when working to promote more knowledge-based social services. The different perspectives have also been expressed in the various national projects in the Nordic countries. The Norwegian endeavour is described in Per-Arne Stolanowski's article, and takes a broad view of knowledge as a base. He begins by indicating three possible sources of knowledge, namely theories, empirical research, and experience, and he explains that the three projects carried out in Norway over the last three years focus on knowledge from all three sources.

The Swedish efforts towards integration between theory and practice are more limited. Martin Börjeson writes that it was primarily the need for research and systematised knowledge that underpinned the Swedish initiative.

The actions taken in Denmark, too, have been aimed at research to a large extent. The organisational change that led to the setting up of the Social Services Board was a result of increasing demands for

evidence-based and effective methods, Annie Gaardsted Frandsen writes in her article. The three main projects described in the Danish article, the evaluation programme, the methodology development programme and the welfare research programme, were all aimed at increasing systematisation in practical social work, at more evaluation, and at increasing knowledge about the results and effects of welfare measures.

The work in Iceland described here by Sigrídur Jónsdóttir naturally reflects a different perspective, since local knowledge is primarily in focus there. While the need for evaluation of the social services is mentioned, it is not firstly systematic intervention research that is described, but rather local projects, often with a strong element of client participation.

It should be emphasised that the different forms the various countries have chosen for their efforts are not necessarily attributable to ideological differences or different viewpoints. They can equally well be explained in terms of differing demographic prospects and the necessary determination of priorities dictated by financial and organisational considerations.

Why just now?

A central question is why these efforts in the area of knowledge development in the social services are being made right now. The explanation for initiating the efforts has been formulated differently in the five countries, but several common starting points can be identified.

One reason for the increased interest in the knowledge base of the social services is demographic developments in Western Europe. The population is increasingly ageing, which sets the framework for the financing of welfare policies. A reduced percentage of gainfully employed people in the population lowers the tax base and thereby reduces the scope for financing public welfare services. But this development also affects the need for welfare policies and measures. This means, in addition to social services and health and medical care, transfers in the form of pensions, benefits for families with children, and so on. These two aspects are often linked, so one can see how demographic factors influence the support burden in society, i.e. the balance between people of active working age (and who finance the public welfare services through work-related taxes) and other groups (above all children,

young people and the elderly) to whom the measures and transfers are mainly directed.

Annie Gaardsted Frandsen, Denmark, maintains in her article that the developments described above imply that the social services need to develop new methods and tools to be able to solve the problems facing the social services better and more efficiently. This, in turn, places great demands on assuring the supply and recruitment of competence in the social sector. In Martti Lähteinen's article on Finland's initiative in setting up centres of excellence, the importance of making the sector attractive is given as one of the reasons for this effort.

The clients' views of the social services and perhaps also their views of themselves have changed in the last few decades. Although there are still groups who find it difficult to fight for their interests, more and more clients demand that the staff of the social services have the right competence and that the methods used be evaluated. Gaardsted Frandsen cites increased demands from both users and citizens in general as one of the reasons why the need for knowledge about the effects of the social services has come into focus in Denmark. Sigrídur Jónsdóttir, too, says that one reason for the efforts made in Reykjavík's urban district in Iceland is that citizens and users are making more demands for freedom of choice and a better range of services.

What part should the state play?

In the Nordic countries by tradition there is strong local and regional self-determination. At the same time all countries are committed welfare states with far-reaching ambitions when it comes to satisfying the citizens' needs, regardless of where in the country they live. This tension between state and regional/local control, which is not necessarily negative but can actually fuel development of the social services, also affects how measures to promote knowledge development are planned and carried out.

In Denmark measures to promote knowledge development in the social services have been carried out by a number of knowledge and information centres rather than by a national board. The Danish Ministry of Social Affairs was responsible for co-ordination. Demands for evidence-based and effective methods, illustrated by the three Danish projects then led, as mentioned above, to the establishment of a national authority. This naturally raises the question of whether

increased knowledge about the effectiveness of the social services for users and clients demands some form of support and co-ordination at national level. Whatever the case, developments in Denmark seem to have moved in that direction.

At the same time as there might be a need for national support, there are naturally also risks when there is a great distance between those who initiate various measures and those who are to apply new knowledge in their practical social work. In Norway this was solved by the three projects being carried out in a collaborative effort among county authorities. From the evaluation accounted for by Per-Arne Stolanowski in his article, the conclusion can be drawn that the county governors' role was important and that it was possible for them to simultaneously support development work and exercise supervision. In Sweden the initial management and development of the three-year project was at national level. The National Board of Health and Welfare set out the criteria for the local authorities and educational institutions that could be granted funds to carry out pilot projects on the integration between research and practice. The National Board of Health and Welfare also decided who was to receive funding, based on the recommendations of an international research group. The actual work, however, was carried out by local authorities and universities in co-operation. In the evaluation of the pilot integration project, the National Board of Health and Welfare's role in relation to local authorities and county councils was not discussed.

However, a related question we can assume is also relevant to several of the other Nordic efforts was highlighted – namely *how state support to knowledge development should be designed to ensure that it is long-term and not only related to individual projects*. That the local authorities, as in Sweden, receive funding after an application procedure can naturally give the state the possibility steering operations in a desired direction. The Swedish evaluation established, for example, that the fact that they were required to follow same application procedure influenced the interaction between the universities and local authorities positively. But the Swedish setup also implies, according to the evaluation, a certain element of vulnerability. The local authorities' difficulties in funding long-term financial commitments means that integration between research and practice may only survive as long as funds are available. This therefore indicates a necessity for long-term structural support.

The evaluation suggested that a number of social research institutes should be established.

The Icelandic work described in this collection of articles, as explained above, is a local authority project. What the author of the article describes as success factors are therefore closely linked to the fact that the initiatives for knowledge development are carried over into local practice. She mentions the importance of carrying out service and user studies, working with focus groups and user councils, developing IT systems and integrating evaluations into the work processes.

What is the focus of the Nordic efforts?

As has been stated above, in the Nordic countries different strategies have been applied to implement efforts designed to further knowledge development. The areas chosen as the focus also differ to a certain extent, but there are striking similarities as well. *Development of methods, evaluation and integration between research and practice* are recurrent themes in the efforts. The need for methodological development is discussed particularly in the Danish (Gaardsted Frandsen) and Icelandic (Sigridur Jonsdottir) articles and in both descriptions they are linked to demographic change and structural transformation in society. New needs require new methods. But it is also a matter of knowing what you are doing and being able to describe it. Society and the users are less and less willing to accept social services that cannot account for how resources are used or on what basis decisions are made.

Evaluation is therefore intimately associated with the development of methods. In Denmark the evaluation programme is an example of the fact that evaluation must be carried out at several levels at the same time. The programme described was designed to evaluate the effects of social policies in relation to the goals established for them, to systematically investigate and evaluate the methods used in social work and to develop methods for ongoing evaluation at local, regional and national levels.

The idea of integration can be understood in different ways. It is partly a matter, as in Finland, of building local and regional structures that support the social services in their endeavours to make decisions based on scientific knowledge, primarily through educational measures. It is also a matter of, as in the full-scale projects in Sweden, estab-

lishing structures in which education, research and practical social work can be conducted side by side.

Two areas that have received varying amounts and types of attention in the countries' efforts are *user participation in knowledge development* and *the need for professional development and education*. In the Icelandic example the clients' part in the development of methods is underlined. Their needs are central, and Jonsdottir therefore places great trust in their abilities to participate in method development and evaluation work. This is not highlighted in the same way in the other texts. One reason could be the national perspective and that user participation often takes place – and should take place – on a local level in practice, to the point of which is to develop services to meet client needs. From experience in Sweden we know, however, that while the question of user participation is often seen as interesting and important, user participation does not always result in concrete measures. Perhaps there is still some uncertainty surrounding the clients' role – are they recipients of services or subjects of control and the exercise of authority? If we are uncertain of the answer to that question then it is difficult to know what role the users can play in the development process.

Projects in Norway and Finland seem, in contrast to the others, to have paid attention to the ongoing further education of staff and opportunities for reflection and guidance as important aspects of knowledge development in the social services. In Finland the supply of competence is one of the primary reasons for concentration on centres of excellence. To meet the increased need for personnel in the social sector their opportunities for competence development must be assured. In Norway the broad view of knowledge means that interest has partly been directed at other aspects of social workers' development. For example, work and organisational forms have received attention. In Norway, professionals' use of knowledge has also been studied, as presented in one article (the BAKST project). In the development programme for the social services, the third Norwegian project mentioned in Per-Arne Stolanowski's article, a basic premise was that it is made up of three components: 1) knowledge 2) willingness to use that knowledge and 3) the ability to translate that knowledge into action. It is thus not only the need for research and evaluation that is in focus when knowledge is to be implemented but also the professionals' approaches and values.

How can the efforts be kept alive?

One question that has already been mentioned and that is vital to all types of structural improvement work in the welfare sector is how positive results are to survive after a project period is over. In Denmark, Sweden and Norway, time limited projects have been chosen as a method to stimulate knowledge, but this is not a totally fair description. The initiatives must be placed in relation to development in the Nordic countries, and perhaps even in the entire Western world, where social work is being upgraded as a field of knowledge. The reason is, perhaps paradoxically, that resources are lessening at the same time as the need for efforts is increasing. Development is stimulated through temporary financial efforts, but is equally driven by demographic and political changes in the contemporary world.

The project model is, however, a delicate one, as discussed above. This has also been taken into account in the Nordic countries' efforts. In Denmark, for example, the evaluation project was aimed not only at evaluating existing operations but also at creating structures and methods for ongoing evaluation. The same was true of the Icelandic project. In Sweden there was talk of a drive to increase structural support. The aim was that funding should stimulate the establishment of structures that would then be maintained through continued local authority efforts or state support. In Finland the concentration on centres of excellence was carried out differently. In 2002 legislation was adopted for the creation of such centres, which naturally means that their continued existence is guaranteed, although the consequence may be that there are fewer possibilities for and incentives to local and regional initiatives.

In conclusion it can be said that a number of initiatives with similar aims were taken at approximately the same time in the five Nordic countries. However, the approaches were different and resulted in different experiences. One reasonable conclusion is that the development of more knowledge-based social services is still at a very early stage. We need to continue discussing what knowledge is and how it can be developed.

PART 1

The national strategies, summary of descriptions from the five Nordic countries

DENMARK Annie Gaardsted Frandsen

GAARDSTED FRANSDEN WRITES that demographic developments, the citizens' increased awareness of their rights, and increasing debate about public services have led to the conclusion that the social services need to develop new methods and tools that for solving social problems better and more efficiently.

In the past there was no central control over the collection of knowledge and knowledge development in Denmark. Efforts to increase knowledge within the social services were carried out by a number of knowledge and information centres rather than by a national board. Increased demands for evidence-based and effective methods led to the setting up of the Social Services Board in 2003, under the Ministry of Social Affairs.

In the late 1990s three major projects were initiated: the Evaluation Programme, the Methodology Development Programme and the Welfare Research Programme. All three aimed at increasing systematisation in practical social work, increasing evaluation, and increasing knowledge about the results and effects of welfare measures.

FINLAND Martti Lähteinen

IN FINLAND, centres of excellence have been set up with the aim of creating new competence and knowledge and assuring a sufficient degree of specialised service. This function, which operates nationwide and thus includes all of the approximately 450 local authority areas, was established as a permanent activity in 2002 with the adoption of a special law. At the same time the endeavour was guaranteed state financing in the form of basic support.

The centres of excellence have succeeded in establishing many firm contacts with local authorities, but contacts with universities and vocational training colleges are not yet completely satisfactory.

This scheme made it possible to initiate the establishment of sustained contact between research, development, education and practice. The centres of excellence function as effective regional builders of networks for various actors, but the research activities of the universities and vocational colleges must have permanent earmarked financing. The same applies to the local authorities' common research activities.

ICELAND Sigridur Jonsdottir

IN REYKJAVIK, as with the local authorities in the other Nordic countries, there is a call for the better use of resources, increased efficiency and increased co-operation among various service units. As an aspect of knowledge development there are various development projects under way. The author takes a local perspective and describes a number of these local projects, often with elements of user participation, including: *Kvindesmedjen* – an 18-month rehabilitation programme for women, *Mandesmedjen* – a rehabilitation project for long-term unemployed men, *Special measures for long-term unemployed benefit-takers*, *Grettistak* – rehabilitation for drug addicts who have never managed to stop their drug abuse, *The way to welfare* – courses and counselling to help people gain control over their economy, *Home support for families with children* – support to parents to prevent children having to be placed in institutions. In Jonsdottir's view it is this type of project that best contributes to knowledge development in the social services.

NORWAY Per-Arne Stolanowski

IN NORWAY, competence and knowledge development have been approached through three major national programmes encompassing the entire social services area:

The development programme for the social services 1991–1994, the reinforcement programme for the social services 1994–1997 and “Knowledge and bridge building” 1998–2001. The aims of the programmes were a) to disseminate knowledge to daily practice, and b) to develop the field workers' ability to apply knowledge in practical activities. These programmes were succeeded by a national quality improvement strategy

for both the health and social services, which will operate for 10 years from 2005. The effort has five foci:

Empowering the service users, empowering the service providers, improving leadership and organisation, strengthening the position of knowledge development in education, and tracing and evaluating the services.

SWEDEN Martin Börjesson

IN SWEDEN the importance of follow up and evaluation of the social authorities' value for clients/service users and for society is emphasised. During the 1990s almost 40 regional and local R&D centres linking research and practice have grown up with financial support towards their planning and/or establishment from the National Board of Health and Welfare.

During the period 2001-2003 there was a programme called "national support for knowledge development within the social services". Within this framework there was a pilot project with a systematic link between the social services, higher education and research at a number of locations/regions in the country. This project was evaluated by a committee that suggested that a number of regional social research institutes should be set up, since it is important to have permanent institutions with long-term financing in order to attract good research workers.

PART 2

The diversity of knowledge development, examples of projects in the Nordic countries

Jens Lykke Hansen · Jörgen Lökkegaard, DENMARK

Rehabilitation and physical activities for the elderly

IN THIS ARTICLE an account is given of a number of measures taken in Denmark to increase knowledge, particularly at the level of local authorities, about the importance of physical training programmes for the elderly. The starting point was a report commissioned by the Danish Ministry of Social Affairs in 2002. In the report research findings from recent decades were summarised, showing that many of the physical limitations affecting the elderly (e.g. reduced muscle strength, poor balance, impaired co-ordination) are more attributable to physical inactivity than to ageing. With this evidence-based knowledge as the foundation, a broad research programme was carried out. The aim was to gain more in-depth knowledge, *on the one hand* as to what type of knowledge is required in relation to elderly peoples' various functional disabilities, *on the other hand* as to what effects of preventive and rehabilitatory training efforts can be empirically verified.

The project was divided into various sub-projects where both prophylactic and rehabilitation measures were evaluated. Based on the preliminary results, evidence-based training programmes have since been designed for various categories of the elderly. Over and above the main project, eight local authority areas included in the trial were selected to build up a leadership organisation for activity programmes for the elderly.

Experience shows that it is generally more difficult to motivate elderly men than elderly women to take part in the activities provided. This explains why elderly men often lead less active lives, which in the worst case can lead to isolation, loneliness, impaired functioning, poorer health and reduced quality of life. If activities for the

elderly are to produce effects in terms of sustained quality of life and maintained ability to function, it might therefore be advantageous to add a gender perspective when planning activity measures.

Sointu Möller, FINLAND

Social workers and clients develop child protection work together

MÖLLER DESCRIBES a development and research project that emanated from an experienced need in practical day-to-day work. The goal was to make child protection work more uniform and to increase client participation. The goal was to develop more standardized working methods and tools and structure for working in child protection and to increase client, especially child, participation. In Finnish child welfare provision there is namely no common approved definition of an assessment, nor the foundations for it. Thus one can get the impression that it is pure chance that determines how the client is assessed. The project was administrated by the association called Pesäpuu, a nationwide child welfare organisation that maintains a centre of expertise in child welfare and receives financing for its development activities from Finland's Slot Machine Association.

In the course of the project a working model was developed for surveying the child's life situation. The child is involved, as a matter of course and systematically, in the process. The model includes five meetings with both child and parents.

The model was created in a development process (which took four years), where particular attention was paid to the following problems: (1) Clients do not often know what the social worker expects from them and what it is that is being judged about them. (2) Clients find it difficult to form an understanding about how the work in child welfare matters proceeds and what is happening. (3) Working methods are traditionally based, particularly in social service contexts, on discussions and interviews. (4) In child welfare work, the child is traditionally only involved to a small extent.

In the working model the clients are given the opportunity to express their views. The social worker and the client (the child and his/her family) make a mutual assessment. This does not mean that there will always be a consensus on the results of the assessment, but that the central aspect in the assessment is the *child's* experiences, feel-

ings and thoughts, in relation to which the social worker and the parents build their assessments.

It was a challenge to create a model for child protection work since any model will be controversial. The question of whether it is really possible to create a model for child protection work arose several times at the development stage. But the working model has received positive responses from the field to date. It helps social workers focus on the involvement of the child. Some aspects that are appreciated are that the model saves time in the long term, gives greater clarity to the work and reduces arbitrariness. It is also felt that the model contributes to safeguarding the employees' own psychological resources.

Catrine Torbjørnsen Halås, NORWAY

With proximity as strength – experiences of professional development in small local authority areas in Northern Norway

THIS ARTICLE ACCOUNTS for “the small local authority project” carried out in 2003–2005 and encompassing 15 local authority areas in Northern Norway. The author was the project director. In this project, work was done on forms for collaboration between practitioners, educators and researchers. This article describes how those involved in the project used the participants' different roles as practitioners, local facilitators, teachers, project managers and researchers in a process of professional development work in four phases:

1. Description of the work and its key dilemmas,
2. Critical reflection about practices and a dialogical process,
3. Finding forms and concepts to express the knowledge gained,
4. Development of relevant measures on the basis of our understanding.

The main aim was to contribute to assuring the quality and stability of the services and the legal rights of the users of social and child welfare services in small local authority areas. Subsidiary aims were (1) to contribute to developing structures for collaboration between small and medium sized local authority areas, (2) to contribute to development, to make visible and communicate the knowledge base in small local authority areas, and (3) to contribute to the development of models, structures and arenas for dialogue and development work involving small local authorities, the educational system and research.

Employees of small local authorities are required to know a great deal and are asked to participate in many contexts. The question is how to guarantee that the employees are professionally competent in relation to these tasks, so that the users receive services of good quality. Several studies show that in many local authority areas there is a shortage of personnel with the right competence and that it is difficult to recruit staff. Research indicates that employees of small local authorities are generalists rather than specialists. In addition they are more restrictive in making decisions that go against the parents' wishes, and it is more difficult for child welfare services to act in a family situation.

Some findings of the project were: Inter-authority competence plans have been produced to get to grips with the problem of the social worker meeting the client both privately and professionally and having a great deal of extra knowledge about the client. The aim is to give common guidance, provide forums for professional reflection, education and a system whereby neighbouring authorities can be asked for help in difficult situations. Articles were written on the subject of how to deal with the proximity between the professional and the private domains and whether there are alternative ways of understanding what professionalism in a small society can be.

In order to be able to meet the demand that the social workers should have specialist knowledge when they are "only" good generalists, tools were created for inter-authority collaboration. The local authorities took initiatives that enabled in-depth studies and specialisation across local authority boundaries, such as the exchange or purchase of services. Moreover, when it comes to child welfare and debt counselling, it is now clear what tasks should be solved locally and what it might be sensible to centralise to achieve a higher degree of specialisation.

Finally, there is the problem of how social workers in a small local authority area can be assured sufficient support and legitimacy in the local community to be able to carry out their tasks as child welfare workers. Some local authority areas have developed a sub-project called "Child welfare as social responsibility" including among other things meetings with collaboration partners to respond jointly to this problem.

Merete Konnerup, DENMARK

The insufficiency of good intentions – effects, evidence and social work

THE AUTHOR BEGINS by describing a now classic research project. The social services had a brilliant idea. They wanted to make an extra effort for elderly people with psychological disabilities living in their own homes. Four experienced caseworkers were employed with a mandate to do whatever was needed to enable these elderly people to lead as good lives as possible.

And so they began. Seventy-six elderly people with psychological disabilities were selected to receive intensive support measures. They had discussions with their caseworkers about once a week over the course of a year, met with a whole series of professionals such as home help service employees, health promotion nurses, doctors and psychiatrists. They received professional counselling if they had financial or legal problems, and so on. Assessments were also made of whether the elderly person's needs could henceforth best be satisfied in his/her own home or whether it would be best for him/her to be admitted to a nursing home.

After three years the project was evaluated. It turned out, among other things, that 53% of the elderly people included in the project had died during these three years. Not particularly surprising, it might be thought, bearing in mind that these were all elderly, weak people.

That could have been the end of the story, but it wasn't, thanks to the fact that the authorities had been forward-looking and insisted that thorough documentation of the effects of the intervention be made. Also, the 76 elderly people with psychological disabilities in the intervention group had been selected *randomly* from a the much larger group of elderly people with psychological disabilities living in this local area. The remaining elderly people could subsequently be used as a control group.

When the two groups were compared it could be seen that mortality in the group that had taken part in the project was much higher – 53% – than in the control group, where it was only 35%. One explanation could be that the elderly people in the project experienced the intensive attention as stressful. Relatively speaking more elderly people from the group that participated in the project were also admitted to a nursing home.

Konnerup takes this example as her point of departure for illustrating the importance of documenting and evaluating the social work on which evidence-based work is founded.

The discussion about evidence-based social work began in the UK in the late 1990s. One reason was that the Blair government came to power with their pragmatic programme, another was that the general public had begun to place higher demands on public services. A third was the widespread demand that research results be passed on to a broader public. In the Nordic countries too an increasing interest in evidence-based work has been noted. One explanation is that the rapid growth of the welfare sector over the last 40 years cannot continue. The need for determining priorities has also increased, the users/clients place more demands on public services, the demands to make the organisation and management of the welfare sector more professional have also increased and privatisation has appeared.

In all these trends there is at least one overriding characteristic: an increased demand for documentation – reliable documentation that can withstand close inspection and that is not dependent on who has produced it.

Awareness of the need for this type of documentation is the basis of evidence-based policies and practice. Emanating from this awareness on an international level, the Campbell co-operation began in 1999, and in 2002 the Nordic Campbell Centre was set up.

The international Campbell's core product is called *systematic Campbell reviews* or systematic research overviews. The aim is to collect, evaluate the quality of and statistically collate all available studies of effects that touch upon a particular public intervention.

Evaluation of the quality of a specific effect study and the research design it employs is based on a simple question which is difficult to answer. Can the research design isolate the change the intervention caused in a client's quality of life from all other possible explanations? And it should be added here – in all fairness – “with reasonable accuracy”.

Sometimes it is claimed that evidence-based work reduces social work to looking things up in a reference manual. But even if a study of effects is well carried out it can typically provide knowledge of the type: “This effort is generally effective for people with these characteristics ...”. It is not a matter of detailed rules the social worker can apply mechanically. Measures must always be customised for the individual

client. The ideal is simply that professionals should perform their work with reference to a common knowledge base. In this way large and inexplicable differences in the measures for the same type of client – from one social services to another, from one institution to another and from one social worker to another – can be reduced. And the quality of social work can improve in the only way that matters in the end – better quality of life for the most vulnerable people in our society.

Pia Hellertz, SWEDEN

What does the social worker have to be able to do? – reflections from a gender and learning perspective

HELLERTZ BEGINS by talking about her own experiences as a social worker. In spite of a long, thorough educational background – a degree in social sciences, a bachelor's degree and psychotherapy studies – she was constantly aware of great limitations in her knowledge and capabilities, particularly when it came to skills. “I felt that I never had any practical use of my extensive theoretical knowledge”.

She feels that the education offered today is not much better than when she was trained. The extensive research about multiple intelligences, learning styles, gender and learning have not influenced higher education to any great extent. Teaching methods are still designed on the basis of mediaeval notions of how to pass knowledge down and teachers' and educational planners' personal opinions.

Instead of thinking about what we as educators should be able “to give” our social science students we ought to ask ourselves a number of questions: What do our students need to be able to do when they have finished their vocational training? What knowledge and skills are relevant and necessary? Who are our students? Do gender and cultural background have any effect on learning? What obstacles are there to students' learning? How are skills and aptitudes developed?

Based on her own dissertation on women's view of knowledge Hellertz demonstrates two approaches to the knowledge social worker training courses are meant to pass on. The one strategy, primarily applied by female students, is *relation orientated*. You “... try in the first instance to understand other people through trying to get inside their thought processes and feelings... You listen, ask and interpret – until you think you have understood”. Hellertz calls the contrasting learning strategy the *distance orientated approach*, more common among male

students. "... you distance yourself, objectify, analyse, critically inspect, discuss and debate in an attempt to disprove the opponent's arguments and opinions".

Hellertz feels that teaching is to a very great extent devised according to the distance-orientated way of learning, in spite of the fact that the vast majority of students are women.

Göran Johansson, SWEDEN

Knowledge development for organisation, and also leadership

IN THIS ARTICLE Johansson draws attention to the fact that many managers in the social services have very difficult work situations. For example, in the care of the elderly in the 1990s it became common that personnel in management positions supervised more than 50 employees. Both experience and research show that this is untenable. The managers often burn out, the staff suffer and do not thrive at work and the quality of the services drops. This results in unofficial managers and leads to conflicts among and within various personnel categories.

So, how could management work well? The college for administration studies at Göteborg University, commissioned by the National Board of Health and Welfare, made a compilation of what researchers say about how many employees a manager can supervise (mainly in health and welfare services) if (s)he is to have a reasonable work load and be able to 'see' the employees. "An organisation should have an adequate number of managers to enable them to see the individual employees, but not so many that the employees' needs for demands and control, responsibility and development opportunities cannot be catered to. Calculations show that with the work tasks incumbent upon a manager in the health and welfare services, the available working time is exceeded when (s)he has to supervise between twenty-five and thirty employees".

Johansson states that at national level there has been a lack of long-term knowledge development and adapted management training courses for managers in the social services. He compares the situation with the school system, which has had state run and state financed head teacher training for more than thirty years. Today, however, master's courses in management and organisation are offered at some universities in Sweden.

At the same time as Johansson emphasises the importance of leadership he warns of the dangers of exaggerating it, since a focus on the leader and leadership can make the discussion superficial: “Sometimes leadership is put forward as a mantra or as an escape from one’s own responsibility. Good leadership is expected to rescue organisations that find themselves in difficulties. The other side of the coin, the employees, also has to be involved and take responsibility in the development”.

Tobias Börner Stax · Steffen Bohni Nielsen, DENMARK

Knowledge generation through social measures – the need for integrating control, learning and documentation through evaluation

EVALUATORS OFTEN FEEL that the evaluation is being conducted because the decision makers – more or less ritually – have written in a final sentence saying that measures that have been introduced based on this or that decision must be evaluated, after which the evaluation is forgotten until the entire project has been completed.

This is the way Börner Stax and Bohni Nielsen describe the situation in their article, in which they argue that the small proportion of public funds in the social domain used for evaluations could be better utilised.

County and local authority social services administrations utilise evaluations to a significant extent as part of the organisation’s management and the results are used, for example, to adapt the organisation of measures. However, to date evaluations have not been integrated into day-to-day running and management, but have instead often been regarded as what comes after a measure or a change.

The authors feel that evaluations serve as a dynamic knowledge-generating tool to a greater extent than today, a tool that can produce ongoing relevant knowledge for frontline staff working with putting public services into effect, with insight into implementation processes and results significant for the planning of social work. At the end of the day this would make it possible to evaluate measures in relation to conceptions, changes, goals, etc.

Evaluations can be carried out in many different ways, can have different *designs*. The authors describe a design used in an evaluation project they were working on: an evaluation of measures introduced for socially vulnerable citizens of Greenland as a result of an earlier

study to establish their living situations. The unusual thing about this evaluation was that it was initiated simultaneously with the project to be evaluated. This makes it possible to establish a “baseline” (the project’s goals, funding and intended effects) instead of needing to reconstruct it long after the event, which is a source of uncertainty in many evaluation designs.

Mons Georg Rud · Simon Innvaer · Geir Smedslund · Asbjørn Steiro, NORWAY

The BAKST project

Norwegian social workers’ use of, attitudes towards and need for practicable knowledge – and their attitudes toward the merger of the social services, the employment offices, and the health insurance offices

What do social workers in social services understand by practicable knowledge, and what attitudes do they have about the merger of the social services, the employment offices, and the health insurance offices?

A questionnaire was distributed to all Norwegian social services offices. The questionnaire was based on a systematic literature search and examination of the literature, passive observations of social workers talking with clients with subsequent semi-structured interviews with the social worker, as well as personal semi-structured interviews.

The results: 2,116 of an estimated population of 2,976 answered the questionnaire (response rate: 71%). The clients themselves, colleagues and guidelines (including the law) are the most important sources of knowledge for the social worker. Researchers and professional journals are ranked lower as the most important source of relevant knowledge. A predominant share believes that a merger should be implemented in order to enhance user-friendliness and improve the services for the clients, but efforts should be activated in order to coordinate the different cultures that exist in the three services.

The conclusion was that Norwegian social workers strongly believe that vital elements in the dialogue are to be taught; and they are more able than they know of themselves. One “door” and common databases are important, but a merger of the cultures and the content of the three services, will not be successful only by setting up a common “entrance door”.

Keywords: social services offices, employment offices, social security offices, questionnaire study, social work

Kristian Tilander, SWEDEN

Feedback project

TILANDER DESCRIBES a project for personal development, a process of reflection, used by the social services in Karlstad since the early 1990s. (From the start it was only used with social workers but it is now also offered to administrators and teachers.) Participants devote four preparation days and two working weeks to the project. They are paid as usual and a substitute does their work for them. The social worker/administrator/teacher interviews a client/a former employee/a student to get a picture of themselves in their professional role. After the process is over all participants write a concluding reflection on their experiences. During the entire period the participants are in contact with a reflection leader. The process is concluded with a residential course where all participants meet and share experiences.

Prior to the very first reflection process there were certain apprehensions. Would a lot of people leave the profession when they realized the profession's complexity and degree of difficulty? Would many people break down when traumas they had not worked through emerged because they had the opportunity to verbalise them? But these apprehensions were not founded. All participants were interviewed in depth after one year and again after another four years. The results were very positive. All felt they had gained better self-esteem, greater ability to relate to clients and colleagues and a clearer platform of their own, and that they were less inclined to blame themselves for things they were not able to influence. Moreover, no participants had left the profession.

Tilander indicates some characteristics of the reflection feedback process: to speak and listen to the end, to be instead of to do, desire over duty, the salutogenic starting point and the shift of perspective, freedom and self-determination, time, and accepting/recognising differences.

In a concluding section Tilander discusses, among other things, people, class differences, pride and shame.

Bengt Börjeson, SWEDEN

The language of knowledge or the language about knowledge

IN THE FINAL CHAPTER on the basis of the articles, Börjeson, discusses the concept of knowledge in social work. He states that people interpret the concept of knowledge differently and that there are great differences among the authors when it comes to the view of knowledge:

“I believe that this is an important fact. In the discussion about the significance of knowledge for the practice of the social sciences we must abandon the idea of finding a uniform concept of knowledge. Neither is it possible to describe any single strategy for capturing knowledge. However, the main lines of demarcation are not between those who assert the importance of “evidence-based knowledge” and those who reject such knowledge. In some form and respect, the concept of evidence is accepted as an instrument of strategy today. To deny the value of evidence-based knowledge would be to exacerbate professional development of social work and to professionally victimizing the players in the arena of social work, the social workers themselves. (...)”

How to develop strategies for making social work, and social and mental health care evidence-based has been a stumbling-block for researchers and practitioners – and possibly also for those with the political responsibility – in these fields. There are a number of reasons for this. Questions include: what is relevant knowledge in the “field of social work”? When research strategies are prescribed to “draw up evidence-based knowledge”, does this also mean prescribing a reductionist, one-dimensional perspective on knowledge?

In addition to the complex issues relating to theory of science and philosophy of knowledge, there are also themes of conflict from sociology of knowledge. Who owns the knowledge? Who defines the problems on the basis of some putative knowledge? (...)

There is a generally held view that the relationship between knowledge and social practice is quite simple: the more knowledge we can “shift out” to the practitioners, the better their practice will be. However, the debate in this anthology indicates that there are serious difficulties involved in creating useful knowledge. This resistance has

resulted in very imaginative research efforts, and in thorough efforts to analyze concepts, knowledge and practice. In fact, the most interesting and innovative attempts to add knowledge to social practice are based on the idea of eradicating the boundaries between the arena where knowledge is produced and the field where practice takes place. The ongoing debate regarding how to mediate relevant knowledge to practitioners takes a new turn if you also see the field of the practitioners as a knowledge-producing arena. In that case, it would not mainly be a matter of social workers “receiving” the knowledge to be disseminated by the researchers. This alternative way of seeing things would give researchers an important role to play in mediating knowledge about how practitioners should “capture” the knowledge they create and the experience they gain in working with their clients (...)

The questions I am asking here are not objections. But they imply that the search for evidence-based knowledge is far more complex (and more interesting) than we have previously thought, when we studied the methods used in medical science to assess the effects of various measures taken.

The full-scale pilot projects in Sweden, provide the opportunity to develop the profession of social work by seeing practice as an inexhaustible and virtually boundless field for the creation of knowledge. This may be the most positive consequence of the debate in recent years regarding the need for knowledge in social work, the implications of the definition of knowledge in social work, the difference between experience-based knowledge and “theoretical” knowledge, the implications of “tacit knowledge”, and so forth.

This entire debate was focused on highlighting the unique definition of knowledge in the practical field of social work. But it never reached the finish line – an unambiguous definition of knowledge. The discussions in the articles in this anthology show that it is time to abandon the vain search for this evasive term. It will never be found. It is just as impossible to define knowledge as to describe the “core” of social work – and so what?

There is also something conspicuously absent in the texts in this anthology. There is a lack of interest in the theoretical work of which research also – in fact mainly – consists. At the end of the day, theoretical analysis is the unique contribution of researchers in collaboration with practitioners. It is quite natural to reject the demands of researchers

to be attentive to the theories used, consciously or subconsciously, in social work in practice, or to try to disregard them. This is not, of course, because theoretical analysis is either “difficult” or “irrelevant” in relation to practical work. Instead, the reason is that the analytical phase of the knowledge process questions established convictions and methods.

To use a buzz word, theoretical work is “deconstructive” by nature. Established thinking is questioned before new thinking is constructed.

The concept of knowledge is strongly positively charged. But in the creative process that is knowledge construction, there are also elements of painful reconsideration and torturous conflicts. Not to mention competition and struggle for the right of interpretation.

Theories are not something with which people are, at best, acquainted. Theories permeate us all, they are the language on which our paradigmatic world views are based. We are greatly anguished, sometimes even boundlessly so, when those theories are subjected to critical examination. But this is suffering we must endure, in our capacities as researchers, as practitioners and as people.

About the authors

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