Editorial

Social work and sociology: historical separation and current challenges

This special issue represents a continuation of work done in recent years in exploring the relationships between social work and sociology. Part of this work has been done at conferences around the world where historical as well as contemporary issues were discussed and where theoretical as well as practical areas became the focus of attention. During the World Congress of Sociology in Gothenburg in 2010, a group of persons interested in the relationships between social work and sociology gathered to discuss common areas of interest. Those participating in this gathering and others showing interest in its discussions shared educational backgrounds in either sociology or social work. The participants at this initial get-together included sociologists teaching in social work programs and social workers teaching in sociology programs and most of them published in journals known to "belong" to the other discipline. Common to all participants at this meeting was the feeling that their professional belonging was not solely related to one or the other of the disciplines.

With this special issue, we wish to continue the discussion of how this relationship between these two disciplines can be looked upon today without deleting the historical experiences. Once upon a time, social work and sociology were one discipline and in this issue we ask the question: what has happened with the division into two? Both disciplines focus on social problems, social structure, social integration and how individuals respond to and live within cultural and structural constraints. Today both disciplines face a possibility of losing some of their most important characteristics to individualizing trends, the disappearance of the importance of "the social" and pressure towards solely evidence-based knowledge. Our aim here is not only to attend to disciplinary similarities and differences, but also to cast light on areas that have been in the shadows of the mainstream narrative. In addition, we hope that the articles in this special issue will

raise new questions and will contribute to continuing discussions between and within each discipline.

By defining one discipline as theoretical and the other as practical, shared achievements together with instances of interdisciplinary knowledge production become easily hidden or invisible. We hope that the articles will shed light on these, answer questions about interdisciplinary relationships and challenge predefined assumptions. First, let us look in the rearview mirror and see what history can tell about this relationship.

Historical separation

Today social work and sociology are two separate disciplines, while this was not the case in earlier times. When reading the history we realize that the division between the two goes along lines involving conceptualizations of theory and practice as well as the politics of gender. The opening of University of Chicago in 1892 was also a beginning of an academic career in sociology for the women being accepted as students at the Department of Sociology. The new study was like a magnet on the women wishing to understand more of the rapidly changing American society being more and more industrialized. In some respects, the department became for the women a "heaven in a heartless world" as Mary Jo Deegan put it (1990). On the other hand, the department failed to satisfy a number of the specific interests of the women. Even though the sociology department gave them new opportunities, their interests were more concerned with how things worked in a fast changing world. Using contemporary terminology, one could say that their interests were not focused on theory alone but also on practical work. For the women the results were nothing in itself, but the most important was the consequences the result had for those involved.

At the university, the men were looked upon as the abstract thinkers and the women became the practical data collectors. The analyses these women produced were often seen as merely mirroring their knowledge as mothers and having no relationship to theory (Deegan, 1990). However, accomplishments and successes in the world of the university were not a must for these women. Their main interest and primary goal was to work for a changing society. Many left the university and turned to Hull House, the first settlement in the United States - also located in Chicago.

In 1920, the University of Chicago opened their first program in social work education. In connection with this, all the women studying at the sociology department left their studies there to begin at the social work department. To move the women was not something done against the will

of the women themselves. On the contrary, it was for many a relief because the new department offered them new possibilities including escape from feelings of being treated by men of the sociology department as second-class sociologists because of their concern with how things worked in society as well as interest in the individual. In the practical world, they could study the themes and use the methods they felt were crucial for answering the big questions of the day and contribute to a new and better society.

The establishment of a separate institute for social work led to segregation between women and men: after the social work institute was established, the sociology department at the University of Chicago became a near-total male bastion while the department of social work had nearly no men among its students and faculty. Applied sociology was defined as belonging outside of the boundaries of the university and became what today could be defined as social work. Consequently, both disciplines suffered major losses in the wake of this change – sociology lost the creativity of the women and social work lost the legitimacy of the men (Deegan, 1990).

Current challenges

Within current social work, there is a strong tendency to make use of individually oriented methods, such as motivational interviewing, coaching, and techniques drawn from cognitive behavioral therapy. In current sociology, agency and individual freedom, for instance, have become much-used concepts in explaining societal change and development. In the past two decades we have witnessed transformations in ideology that have made it difficult to see anything but individuals in society, and structures have become more invisible. Consequently, what once were understood as societal problems are increasingly perceived as an aggregate of individual conditions.

We see a similar tendency in the downgrading of social oriented schemes in the welfare apparatuses figuring centrally in the Scandinavian welfare model (Esping-Andersen 1990). We are currently witnessing the large-scale privatization of social welfare systems and the opening of long-standing publicly owned infrastructural arrangements to competitive bidding on a near-daily basis.

How may these and related changes be explained? Politically, part of the explanation may be traced back to a large and relatively prosperous middle class whose economic success has been produced in great part by the workings of the Scandinavian welfare model. Paradoxically, the political rationale underpinning the many transformations of the welfare state leading to greater inequality in society, gains much of its support among those whose prosperity has been made possible by the very same welfare state in the form, for example, of tuition-free higher education, child care systems and child benefits making possible dual income families, low cost medical care, and other services.

A process paralleling the same development appears to be taking place in theoretical accounts of the workings of society, where structural theories have become unfashionable. Structuralism conceptualizes human existence as basically communal. This implies that every human being presupposes that other humans live in the same world, that the world is not one's own, but rather shared with all others, even if it is perceived differently (Østerberg 1982, 144). There is an inner relation between society and its individual members. Society is not simply an accumulation of single individuals connected by outer relations. Durkheim, the father of structuralism, argued that when the collective consciousness and social practices of a society lose their religious character, the individual then becomes the object of religious reverence. A cult worshiping the dignity of the individual person then arises (Durkheim 1964, 407). This was something new, as the collective consciousness previously had been directed toward society. In its new form, the collective consciousness of the individuals becomes directed toward the individuals themselves. Durkheim feared that increasing egoistic individualism would lead to the "ensuing dissolution of society" (1964, 172). He later emphasized that "communal life is impossible without the existence of interests superior to those of the individual" (1973[1898], 44).

In the realm of contemporary social theory, the growing emphasis on the individual and individualization make it easier to overlook the communal and the social than at earlier times. The social structural dimensions of society are taken for granted and social processes are often silenced. These developments raise the question of whether both social work and sociology are in danger of losing some of their specific features as "the social" becomes less important. If sociologists and social workers increase their cooperative efforts, they will be better equipped and more able to meet these challenges. For this reason, one central aim of this special issue is to stimulate debates

and discussions about the theoretical ideas and concepts connecting as well as separating the two disciplines.

Theoretical intersections

Even though we have made a clear distinction in this special issue between social work and sociology, we would like to emphasize that the boundaries between the two disciplines are not that clear cut. It is usual to give a kind of ownership of a certain theory to a specific discipline. We are accustomed to hearing and reading: "sociological theories" or "the philosopher said". For certain purposes this is valid and of importance. But this naming also constitutes a framing. And in an issue where questions of theories and belongings are discussed, it is important also to focus on immanent power within concepts and hierarchies.

A question to be asked is to whom belongs a theory? Does for instance Michel Foucault's ideas belong to philosophy? History? Sociology? Or Social Work? What about Erving Goffman? Is he within social psychology, sociology or social work or social anthropology? Mary Richmond? Is she only within social work? And can her theories be used or connect with or have similarities to theories in psychology, sociology and anthropology – just to take some examples. That question can be asked about almost all social theorists. This is of special importance when we discuss what we call *sociological* theories in *practical* social work. What is explicitly expressed and what is implicitly taken for granted?

Whatever the answers to the questions posed, the way we express ourselves also includes power and hierarchy. And our way of expressing ourselves through our use of language is also a way of reproducing power and hierarchy. According to Dorothy Smith this reproduction of power through language is immanent and ideological – almost like a genetic code (Smith, 1993). However, as several of the articles in this special issue demonstrate, theoretical innovation evolves from intersections with as well as interaction between disciplines. And in so doing, these help us to interrogate our immanent and near-automatic ways of expressing ourselves.

The composition of this special issue reflects the diversity of perspectives in contemporary social work research. As readers will discover, the authors of the articles here included build on a wide range of theoretical perspectives such as applied sociology, complexity theory, theories of social

systems, actor network theory, and psychosocial studies. Individually and collectively, the articles aim to destabilize traditional disciplinary boundaries and the division between theoretical research and practice to enrich our knowledge of social work and sociology's identity and knowledge bases.

Before we present a brief overview of the articles, we would like to thank all the contributing authors as well as reviewers for their patient cooperation. A special thanks goes to the co-editor of the journal Monica Kjørstad for her help and support during the whole process. Without her contribution, we would not have reached the result as smoothly as we have done. Because of all that help, we present the current volume in the hope that it will be used in discussing the relationship between social work and sociology in the past, present and future perspective.

Structure of the special issue

The special issue comprises two parts. The first part includes four articles reassessing the historical foundations of social work and sociology. The four articles included in the second part focus upon the contribution of recent theoretical developments within both social work and sociology to the conceptualization and practice of social work and sociology.

Ian Shaw, in 'Sociological Social Workers: A History of the Present?,' introduces us to neglected figures of a field he describes as 'sociological social work'. In so doing, he raises questions about the nature and boundaries of social work as a discipline and a profession. The article explores the thinking of sociological social workers about the environment, the case and social work intervention. It focuses as well as their ties to early constructionism.

In 'The Other Chicago School – A Sociological Tradition Expropriated and Erased', Michael Seltzer and Marit Haldar bring a fresh look into the historical relationship of social work and sociology. The authors ask how men sociologists from the Chicago school and the women from Hull House understand the relationship between structure and agency, uncovering striking contrasts between them.

The contribution by Siri Fjeldheim, Eivind Engebretsen and Irene Levin, 'The Theoretical Foundation of Social Case Work' explores the theoretical foundations of social work. The authors return to social work's early history and examine Mary Richmond's book 'What is social case

work' from 1922. They highlight three main aspects in Richmond's writings: 1) the basic categories of processes and human interdependence, 2) the concept of 'personality' and 3) the concept of 'man in environment'.

Kjeld Høgsbro's article, 'Evidence and research designs in applied sociology and social work research' also stresses the importance of a historical awareness for understanding the present. The author asks how the relationships between applied sociology and policymaking have evolved across time. The author reviews methodological discussions within applied sociology and draws lessons for apprehending current challenges.

The special issue´s final section suggests how current theoretical developments within both sociology and social work can enhance our understanding of social work as a discipline, a profession and a practice, and constitute a resource for sociologists and social workers in responding to the challenges they are currently facing.

In 'The help system and its reflection theory: A sociological observation of social work', Werner Schirmer and Dimitris Michailakis ask how the relationship between social work and sociology can be understood. To develop a theoretical understanding of social work, the authors draw on Niklas Luhmann's theory of social systems. Moreover, they stress the implications of this renewed understanding for social work research – notably the inescapability of normativity.

Liz Frost's article 'Why social work and sociology need psychosocial theory' examines recent theoretical development at the boundaries between sociology and social work. The author asks how psychosocial studies can help in bridging the gap between social work and sociology. The author attributes the difficult dialogue between social work and sociology to the sociological theories that have been used, notably the influence of post-structuralism. Then, she puts forward psychosocial theory as a valuable alternative.

In 'Complex issues, complex solutions: Applying complexity theory in social work practice', Sheila Fish and Mark Hardy ask how social work can respond to current requirements for accountable decision-making. To answer this question, the authors turn towards complexity theory. They report about their own unsuccessful attempt to apply complexity theory to social work practice. They then explain how this experience led them to reconsider the usefulness of complexity theories.

The concern with how to strengthen social work's knowledge base in order to respond to current pressures on social work is also at the core of the article 'What happens to the social in social work?'. In this article, Jorid Krane Hanssen, Gunn Strand Hutchinson, Rolv Lyngstad, and Johans Tveit Sandvin question scholarly interpretations framing individualization, standardization and pressures for evidence-based practice as a decline of the social.

Irene Levin, Marit Haldar and Aurélie Picot

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