Anita Røysum
Associate Professor
Department of Social Work, Child Care and Social Policy
Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences, Oslo, Norway
Phone: +47 98438800
anita.roysum@hioa.no

# "How" we do social work, not "what" we do

This article explores how Norwegian social workers at municipal social services offices experience and explain social work as professional knowledge and theory, and examines examples from their experience working in new, multi-professional settings. It draws on a qualitative multi-method study focused on professional knowledge in social work practice during and after the reform merging state offices for employment, social insurance and components of municipal social services into "one-stop shops" – called Nav offices. The study found social workers articulating their professional ethical perspectives as social work while defining themselves as "us" distinct from their new colleagues. Paradoxically, they found themselves facing challenges in articulating social work theoretically. Their focus was not necessarily on *what* they did as social workers - but on *how* they did it. In de-emphasising the theoretical in favour of the principles and practical benefits of their profession, they took on roles of pragmatic and non-protectionist professionals (PPP). They became pragmatic in their efforts to safeguard the best interests of clients while being nonprotective of their professional knowledge in claiming everyone can practice social work if what one does is "good". One possible consequence of this is that the expert knowledge involved in social work may become degraded to ordinary and everyday knowledge.

**Introduction**

Social workers who work in the public social services today are required to adapt to an environment defined by new public management (NPM) and market values. They face tougher demands owing to economic principles, public service reforms and "new" one-stop offices integrating diverse social service agencies and professions (Banks 2004; Meeuwisse, Scaramuzzini, and Swärd 2011; Nothdurfter 2016). These offices aim to make social services more efficient, comprehensive and seamless as part of more "active" labour market policies (Lorentz 2001; Pollitt 2003). In Norway, these resulted in the Nav reform, the most thoroughgoing welfare reorganization in the nation's history (Helgøy, Kildal, and Nilssen 2011; Røysum 2013). This reform merged the state's employment office *and* social insurance office with parts of municipal social services into one-stop agencies known as Nav offices (Royal Proposition No. 46, 2004–05).

This article draws on a qualitative multi-method study aimed at exploring the effects of these reforms on social work practice and the professional role of municipal social services workers. It focused on how social workers at Nav offices explained their professional knowledge, experienced their professional identities, and related to other professions in these new settings. The study employed a discursive framework in examining at these sites the relationship between social work practices and the normative foundations of the profession. Complementing the theoretical notion of discourse understood as a way of communicating social work as knowledge and identity were elements such as isomorphism drawn from new organisational theory.

**The Nav offices**

The one-stop agencies provide to clients more than 40 types of state-funded support services (employment services and state pensions) in addition to municipal financial social assistance

programmes, an employment qualification program for those who have been or are at risk of receiving long-term social assistance and temporary housing support. Inclusion of other municipal social services is optional for municipalities, and a number of Nav offices also provide social service to drug addicts and refugees. Prior to the Nav reform, these and related services were provided by three main agencies. These included:

- *Municipal social service offices* offering counselling and follow-up services in addition to social assistance and other material supports.

- *State employment office*s providing employment services, often with a mediating and guiding role in assisting people in finding work.

- *State social insurance offices* administering and providing help with retirement and disability benefits and pensions.

Not surprisingly, each of these agencies had their own unique organizational cultures often reflecting the backgrounds of their staffs as well as bureaucratic traditions. Employment and social insurance offices shared cultures characterised by hierarchy, bureaucracy and "control" over their work. Their employees often had only in-house education or different educational backgrounds seldom qualifying them as professionals which requires a long training and formal qualifications for the specific job (Røysum 2013). Municipal social services employees were primarily qualified graduates of schools of professional social work[1] and in practicing their professional roles, they were relatively autonomous, i.e., making discretionary decisions. In addition, their agencies as municipal departments had traditions of local self-management (Helgøy et al. 2011; Røysum 2012, 2014; Jessen and Tufte 2014).

The establishment of Nav offices had major implications for social workers[2] in terms of the various modes of governance and steering instruments, the integration and specialisation of services and benefits and the power balance among the different groups of employees. In these new settings, they have experienced better collaboration with employees from the other

services but increased workloads and efficiency requirements. However, they have encountered challenges in terms of the ways in which they are expected to help clients, such as follow-up work for people with complex needs (Røysum 2012, 2014; Fossestøl, Breit, and Borg 2014). In this regard, research on other welfare reforms has shown the dominant role of state agencies over municipal actors, of labour market issues over social policy issues and of the tension between standardisation and local flexibility (Lorentz 2001; van Berkel, De Graaf, and Sirovàtka 2011; Minas, Wright, and van Berkel 2012; O'Leary, Tsui, and Ruch 2013; Minas 2014).

## Theoretical perspectives

The article views discourses as frameworks for understanding, including guidelines for action. Discourses can create limits on what is considered legitimate and affect individuals' perceptions of reality and their sense of identity (Mills 1997; Foucault 2002 [1966]). Most people's actions are empowered by their own affiliations, but also by others' expectations. We understand ourselves through others' reactions to our actions (Cooley 1902). By identifying how people define and distinguish between themselves and others, we can examine their affiliations and identity constructions related to discourses. Social workers' professional discourses and identities depend on how they define their work with clients, their professional knowledge and their professional values and principles. The social work literature contains theoretical, practical and normative discussions that synthesise social workers' knowledge (Trevithick 2008, 2012; Hugman 2009).

Professional ethics is a core dimension within social work discourses reflecting an obligation to articulate ethical principles and standards. Primary ethical principles include social justice, respect, a person's dignity and worth and the client's best interest. Ideally, these principles are closely reflected in social workers' professional identities and values –

especially involving the idea that social work is a practical, rather than theoretical, enterprise (Banks 2012; Hugman 2009; Trevithick 2008, 2012; Gould 2004). When practice is defined as the opposite of theory, the assumption is that it cannot be theorised or concretised (Freidson 2001; Levin 2009).

Andrew Pithouse (1998, 5) claims that it is profoundly difficult to explain what social work is really like. Social work is invisible because social workers often struggle to articulate and define social work (Pithouse 1998; Moriss 2016). However, social work can be considered "concrete" in terms of being a visible and evidence-based knowledge (Matthies 2013; Gray and Schubert 2012). It is influenced by disciplinary power and the alliance between politics and "science", as reflected nowadays in evidence-based practice (EBP) and NPM, incorporating top-down rationalistic perspectives. Social workers must accept these exercises of power based on prevailing forms of knowledge and practice, in parallel with the implementation of policy (Hanssen et al. 2015; Petersén and Olsson 2015). Even when working in human service organizations, social workers often experience many rules and regulations preventing them from serving their clients in accordance with their professional discourses seeing social work as a value-based, practical-moral activity (Parton 2000; Hasenfeld 2010; Banks 2011).

There also exist different and conflicting discourses and types of knowledge in social work (Gray and Schubert 2013). Social workers' professional identities are not solely related to their professional discourses about accepted and legitimate knowledge and practice. Within any organisation, its members' actions are based on specific resources, rules, hierarchies and cultures and one way of understanding the interplay of these is to employ isomorphism as theoretical perspective. Isomorphism can be described as an increasing structural similarity within an organizational field when actors make organisations similar as they try to change them (Berger and Luckmann 1967).

This concept can be thought of as involving three distinct types: coercive, mimetic and normative isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell 1983, 1991). Coercive isomorphism means that the organisation is subjected to pressure, persuasion or requests from its environment to introduce specific organizational solutions, while mimetic refers to the organisation imitating its environment, often in dealing with ambiguity/uncertainty about its own goals and environmental features. Normative processes refer to values spread by professional networks where actors create products and identities based on shared interpretations and symbols.

The discourse of professionalism can be used to understand occupational change and social control in employing organisations. Julia Evetts (2006, 2011) describes professionalism as a discourse on increasing organizational control over work conditions, hierarchical structures of authority and standardised work practice, or as an occupational professionalism that confirms the botton-up control of professions and a more collegial form of authority based on trust. In the findings presented in the following, social workers' professional discourses are understood as *one* discourse based on internal ideals, principles and written and unwritten norms, even though discourses, like professionalism, are active process terms.

**Methods and data**

The development of the Nav reform and the Nav offices involved changes and processes in many arenas and levels simultaneously. In trying to grasp this complexity, I first considered doing fieldwork only in Nav offices, but it soon became clear that a greater breadth of material was needed. In particular, it was necessary to broaden my focus to view the field as a professional field because of ongoing discussions and experiences regarding many different arenas involving Nav offices and discussions and debates in journals and at conferences. This called for a broad methodological and analytical design where different methods could supplement each other. This resulted in four ways of collecting qualitative data: participant

observations and semi-structured interviews at Nav offices, analyses of relevant articles and discussions in the profession's journal and observations at relevant conferences[3].These methods were employed throughout the entire reform period from the beginning of 2005 through 2015, approximately five years after the establishment of the last Nav office in Norway.

Participant observation took place over one two-month period in 2007 and another two-month period in 2008 at one of the Nav pilot offices beginning when it first became operative. This was a medium-sized office with approximately 40 employees and providing a range of municipal social services. In carrying out my research at this office, my aim was to learn how social workers experienced, communicated and interacted with their new professional roles as well as about their treatment of social work as knowledge. Each period concluded when I felt that no 'new' information could be obtained.

At the office, I conducted semi-structured interviews with nine women and three men about the same themes. Eight interviewees were social workers from the office's social service unit. Most of these were professionally qualified social workers and represented all areas of work within the social services in the Nav office. I also carried out semi-structured interviews with two employees from former social insurance offices and two from former employment offices focused on how they viewed the work of the social workers at the office.

Additionally, I carried out a content analyses of all articles and discussions focusing on the Nav reform and social work practice at Nav offices published during a 10-year period beginning in 2005 in *Fontene*, the journal of the Norwegian Union of Social Educators and Social Workers (FO). And from 2007 to 2011, I also took part and made observations at six conferences addressing social work practice and client follow-ups in Nav offices. Five of the conferences were intended for Nav social workers who were members of FO, while the sixth and largest conference, sponsored by the Norwegian state, was intended for all Nav employees.

Both the interview data and the observation notes from the field studies at the Nav office and the conferences were transcribed. These textual materials, together with the journal publications, were analysed during and after the data collection process using a theme-based methodology. Additionally, I looked for themes in the material based on the operationalisation of the study's research questions involving such issues as collaboration between social workers and other staff, social workers' work requirements and social work as professional knowledge in the Nav offices. Throughout these analyses, I performed comparisons across the material and among the different types of data to identify meaningful patterns (Kvale and Brinkman 2009). This helped me in developing a general picture by matching the findings from one context to another. The broad perspective enabled me to match the findings from one context to what I observed in another as a whole.

Given the space limitations of the journal format, this article focuses mainly on observational data drawn from one internal social services meeting at the Nav office. This was chosen because it provides a fairly representative illustration of how social workers in the study experience and discuss social work in Nav. I also refer to additional empirical data from the study to compare and to support the findings from this meeting to illustrate the relevance of the discussion at this meeting to how social workers in the study report their experiences working at Nav offices.


**An observational note**

At the Nav office where I conducted my fieldwork, the municipal social services staff were accustomed to holding regular professional meetings prior to being merged into the Nav system. These social workers and their manager, Helen, repeatedly told of feeling how the merging process had harmed these professional discussions and they had heard that these meetings had been eliminated at other Nav offices. The social workers still had their internal meetings, which they considered positive. Nevertheless, they were dissatisfied with other

developments and they often held informal discussions about the conditions for social work practice within Nav. Therefore, they decided to devote one internal social services meeting to this topic. In presenting the discussion at this meeting[4], I wish to illustrate how social workers in municipal social services offices experience and explain social work as knowledge in facing a new, multi-professional setting - and how they seek a collective identity by using the ethical perspectives of professional social work[5]. Then, in the next section, I will analyse this data according to the main findings, and in the section "Theoretical discussion", I will relate them to previously presented theory.

We are at the social workers' internal meeting. There are nine people, all employed by the municipal social services at the Nav office.

Helen begins by talking about the background of the topic, namely, social work in Nav. Lisa, the local representative of FO at the Nav office, says that social services providers are not only qualified social workers but a mixed group of employees, though she says, "we all do social work". She then notes that Nav is the arena of the future for social work. Some of the attendees at the meeting nod their heads enthusiastically.

Most of the attendees are involved in the discussion. Many take the view that the clients with whom social services work are the neediest of the Nav office's clients, requiring close follow-up. John notes that the social workers have many shared clients with the staff of the former social insurance office and the former employment office but states, "We from social services must address multiple facets of a client's life, which is why it's so important we go on seeing the whole client". He notes that "we" and "the other" staff at the Nav office each have important knowledge and expertise. The others seated around the table nod in agreement. The discussion then turns to what

the clients actually gets from their contact with Nav. It grows quieter around the table until Jane, an experienced social worker, speaks up. She, too, uses the pronoun "we", saying, "We find ourselves having to be participants in the other staff's duties, but they won't take part in ours". Lisa interrupts eagerly and says someone still has to look after the neediest clients, and "we, the social services, have to go on doing so". The others nod again.

There is a pause before Tina exclaims that the other staff in the Nav office think we social workers are specialists but that "the others think we're a bit strange". The others around the table sigh resignedly. Jane says it is because we social workers are so strict about maintaining our professional confidentiality internally in the Nav office. Following a bit of discussion, the participants conclude that they are loyal to their clients.

Their manager, Helen, says we ought to be discussing social work in Nav: "What we mean by it and what things are like for us in relation to it. For example, Catherine here in social services does as much social work as she herself does, even though she [Catherine] is not a qualified social worker". Helen also notes that the staff from social insurance also has demanding and complex tasks: "It's not about whether or not one is a social worker, many people are involved in social work", she says. Everyone in the group nods.

The group goes on discussing the conditions surrounding their work with the social services clients. Emma says that compared with the other staff's client groups, it is not easy for the social workers to see when their job is finished, inasmuch as "We as social workers have to work in several arenas, and we have more things to do, and different things, than the other staff". She says they cannot "sign out" clients from the municipal system. Tina says, "Traditionally, we're always there for our clients".

Thomas says he often has to visit clients in prison, and he maintains contact with the clients for longer than, for example, the staff from the former social insurance office. When clients receive a disability pension and are in jail, the social insurance staff neither visits them in prison nor follows up with them other than to pay them their benefits. John notes, "We from social services work with areas of other people's private lives, which makes it social work". Helen interjects and says that this depends on the individual, and she adds that, for example, Caroline from social insurance provides considerable follow-up for her clients. She also notes that the amount of follow-up a client receives largely depends on the individual in social services. The others again nod in agreement.

Helen says that routines, procedures and controls on administrative decisions are increased since they became a Nav office and that things are moving toward increased bureaucracy. Thomas agrees and says that there is more paperwork than before. Some discussion regarding the burden of having so many bureaucratic demands follows, as social workers face so many crises and chaotic situations everyday with their clients. The group agrees that simultaneously reporting to a large bureaucratic apparatus is challenging.

The clock shows that the meeting is moving towards its close. Helen says that this has been an important discussion about social work in Nav. Again, the members of the group nod in agreement before everyone rushes back to their tasks.

**The findings**

I will in this section reveal the findings from the material.

*No clear articulation of social work*
The meeting, aimed to provide social workers from the social service at the Nav office with opportunities to discuss Nav social work, showed little clear articulation of social work itself.

Not unexpectedly after a major reform, the attendees were keen to discuss other, more immediately pressing matters, such as how client caseloads are assigned and problems dealing with increasing bureaucratic demands. As evident in the meeting, many were worried that their social work knowledge and skills would be lost in the reorganisation process. Paradoxically, they could not claim the loss of such knowledge and skills without expressing more concretely their understanding of what they believed social work to be. Despite being unable to articulate this, they appeared to share an implicit understanding of social work as something creating a sense of community and shared identity among them.

### *A strong "we" identity but who are "we"?*
While the social workers at the meeting were unclear about what social work "is", categorisations emerged in the form of "us/we" and "the others". The attendees expressed their views regarding the group with which they or other Nav office staff were affiliated. Identifying exactly who was to be contained with this "we" was nevertheless difficult. The meeting began with the union (FO) representative reminding them that the attendees were not only qualified social services workers but also a mixed group with differing backgrounds involved in social work. Here, who they were as members of the social service staff was defined to include all —even though different, they are the same.

### *Clear on their ethical perspectives*
At the meeting, the social workers expressed that "we" were traditionally "there for our clients". The attendees were particularly keen to tell each other how they worked from the objectives of "wishing the client well" and having solidarity with them. They talked about their concerns for the client's best interests regarding how clients are served by their contact with Nav. They referred to their perception of their new colleagues' views of them as social workers as a bit strange because they were strict about maintaining professional internal confidentiality in the Nav office. They noted, "we're the ones the clients can trust", concluding that confidentiality is important because of their loyalty to clients. Noting that

"someone has to look after the neediest clients", they reported they being particularly exposed because the owning in their work to defending the vulnerable clients.

This notion seemed to reflect the idea that they as social workers had to "defend" their clients against the system and possibly against their new colleagues from the former insurance and employment offices in case these persons did not "wish the clients well". The "we" focus was particularly prominent here. The meeting attendees implied that the "others", their new colleagues, were not as interested in their clients as they were.

***Toning down social work as theoretical knowledge***
During the meeting, some of the social workers' new colleagues were noted as being on the clients' sides, and by caring about clients' best interests and following them up, they were viewed as also practising social work. In discussing how the ways of treating clients varied from person to person, the social workers concluded that if the work is "good" and in the clients' "best interests," then social work was being practised. This kind of understanding appeared to link social workers' identities to each practitioner's personality and interpretation of the professional principles of "how" to do their work. This way of framing caring for and attending to the needs of the client seemed to be also linked to the social workers' use of their professional ethics as symbols of the exercise of their profession.

They seldom used theoretical language to discuss their knowledge while primarily citing the importance of these and other social work principles. They also toned down the theoretical bases of the professional knowledge they had acquired through their educations. For instance, their manager noted at the same meeting, "It's not about whether or not one is a social worker; many people are involved in doing social work". The social workers also appeared to tone down their formal competence and expertise, noting that training as a social worker is not necessary to perform social work. How each individual sees his or her professional role seems most important in social work, indicating that "how" is more important than "what".

Many of the themes touched upon at this meeting was mirrored in the interviews, at the

conferences and in the journal entries. One of the social workers interviewed at this Nav office had this to say when I asked about social work

> I can't remember the definitions of it, but I do know what I believe it to be. …It's about meeting people with respect and then recognising their own responsibilities for their own lives. I believe the point about respect is important. Listening and providing support.

She added,

> I also believe we social workers must have humility in considering that others also have a lot of knowledge…. They may have very good ways of thinking, but they don't fully understand that we cannot reject anyone. There are the social services that have to help everyone regardless.

In reflecting on practice at another Nav office in *Fontene*, one social worker noted that

> We have been drilled over a period of three years and then had continual professional guidance about ethical dilemmas at the municipal social services. We are now finding in our day-to-day work here at Nav that there are perspectives the governmental side of the organisation has neither thought through nor emphasised (2007, no. 14, 12).

In this journal and at the conference, there was little specific focus on what social work "is". Social workers again appeared to have difficulties articulating social work while remaining quite clear about *how* the work is "done". The ethical values and perspectives of the

profession were often mentioned as in this quote from the leader of FO about choosing to become a professional social worker and then working in Nav: "It means that you have chosen a side. When you work in Nav, you are helping to ensure that we have a society where there is place for everyone" (2015, no. 3, 9).

Despite the overwhelming consensus among social workers found in the data about the help and support their profession provided clients, the definition of social work remained unclear. As one social worker I interviewed during my field studies noted, "One could discuss whether it is human compassion or social work". She further stated, "I'm not sufficiently interested in the theory…. It's as much about personality". She also said that newly qualified social workers have a certain idealism and hope to help people who are different rather than just anyone coming off the street. "We have also learned something about professional work", she emphasised. However, another social worker recalled that

> The most important thing I got from the educational programme in professional social work was the view of human beings. It is important but not sufficient for practicing professional social work in a complex society in 2014 (*Fontene* 2015, no. 1, 48).

In discussing issues related to what is necessary for practicing social work, one Nav manager with a social work education pointed out that "social workers do not have lower status, but there are differences as to how well they manage to explain their own competence" (2011, no. 3, 10).

One significant paradox revealed by the data showed that while Nav social workers seldom spent much time explaining exactly what social work means, they frequently discussed why no one else could comprehend what constitutes social work. At a conference in 2015, a social worker pointed out a major consequence of this paradox in noting that "people outside don't

understand what we do". She then added:  "We barely understand it ourselves, at least that's the way we talk about it internally. How, then, are we supposed to be able to talk about it outside?"

This problem was reflected in comments by others in the Nav system who told of not always understanding how social workers worked and this in turn led many social workers to report feeling that their knowledge was not receiving the respect it deserved in the Nav system. At a conference in 2011, one social worker complained that "we have professional knowledge and training that is barely appreciated in Nav". Another social worker took up this problem in providing this statement to *Fontene*'s professional ethics panel:

> I am finding that the new manager does not value my competence as a qualified social worker. She says we are all going to unlearn our skills and all going to work in a new way. My experience is that it's taboo to talk about how some of us, after all, have three years in professional educational programs…. We have said that we want to go on having our own professional meetings, but we are being denied this. Any attempts to get ethical discussions going in other meetings are met with impatience and rejection (2010, no. 1, 62).

The findings made clear a major problem to be overcome is represented by social workers' lack of articulation about what constitutes social work. While relatively unaccustomed to expressing their theoretical knowledge, social workers paradoxically appeared to expect others to understand and respect the same unvoiced knowledge. In some ways, too, this self-silencing is reflected as we have earlier seen in the taboo about stating that they have spent three years in a professional educational program. Rather than voicing their theoretical knowledge, the data indicated that social workers were much more articulate in emphasising

that they had something to contribute to Nav and that their professional practice and ethical principles were extremely important for their clients.

**Theoretical discussion**

*"We", "them" and expectations*
By imagining how others perceived them, the social workers in the study formed a picture of how others evaluated them (Cooley 1902). In so doing, they also formed a picture of "the others" in light of themselves. They identified their role vis-à-vis "the others", i.e. staff in the Nav office, including what they as social workers considered the goodness of their intentions and work with vulnerable clients. In this process, the social workers appear to have experienced "these others" at Nav offices as threats to their own current and future professional and occupational status within the Nav system. They also appeared to experience increases in routines, procedures and controls on administrative decisions at Nav offices as obstacles preventing them from providing the help needed by their clients.

The qualities that they need to work with clients, and their ways of understanding them and working with them as social work professionals, seemed to be downplayed. This may represent a threat to their professional discourse because their "good" social work intentions could lose their meaning. They may "toning up" their ethical principles as expressions of an occupational professionalism that confirms the bottom-up control of professions (Evetts 2006). This may indicate an anti-identification and a protest against the expectations for Nav as a new organization, which largely seemed to be based on an organizational professionalism and discourse.

The social workers' professional identities seemed to be formed from at least two sides in the Nav offices. First, they are being shaped by positions taken in safeguarding professional values and traditions they experience as being under press. At the meeting, when speaking of "the others", the social workers seemed to be referring to their identities as based on their own

professional discourse. They appeared to be attempting to maintain control over their tasks in reproducing their professional principles in social work.

By viewing social workers' professional discourse as based on their internal ideals and written and unwritten norms, the study suggests that perhaps the driving force in their work in the Nav offices is normative, i.e., based on the ethical principles of the profession. This pattern appeared in the data how the social workers' knowledge was defined and applied. This normative character was further reinforced by their emphasis on ethical principles and values in the sense of something that all social workers know and understand, as "objective" truths contributing to a feeling of community. Social workers may understand their values, based on ethical principles, *as* social work (Trevithick 2008), even if this not necessarily is seen as scientific knowledge. Taken together, it seems that these ethical beliefs are woven into the fabric of their "selves" to constitute a key element in their professional identities.

Second, the study found that social workers adopted new perceptions and identities following the introduction of the Nav offices. Theoretically, one could understand that social workers adjust relative to their previous positions via redefinition of their within Nav as a discursive field. They may gradually identify with a new role, even if they as social workers do not necessarily feel that it is correct. Juggling more paperwork and other administrative work, they experienced increased time pressures and greater demands for efficiency having a more administrative feel than that of traditional social work practice (Røysum 2012). The study found that they increasingly reported experiencing a basic dilemma in their practice between performing a rational-technical activity and performing a practical-moral activity (Parton 2000). This is also consistent with the challenges that social work faces internationally as exemplified, for example, by a study in the UK showing that social workers experiencing heavy caseloads report they are accomplishing little social work (BASW 2012).

### *Control mechanisms*
The study shows that Nav as organisation creates a new context and discourse but that the

power underlying the knowledge control is central. Because of this connection, one can try to understand the situation of social workers within this system in light of isomorphism as a theoretical perspective (DiMaggio and Powell 1983, 1991). Nav is not a homogeneous organization, and can consists of different layers and interest. However, it seems that there are some mechanisms and features of the Nav system providing its employees with professional discourse having its "own" norms and ethics. This may be why it seemed to be tabooed within Nav to talk about the fact that the social workers have spent three years in professional educational programs. Such control mechanisms would be considered coercive isomorphism in that social workers rather uncritically must adapt to the new organizational solutions. Social workers in the Nav system are expected among other things to cope with the state's employment offices' method of conducting follow-up in the form of an increased focus on activation and to cope as well with the state social insurance office's bureaucratic procedures. This can be understood not only as a coercive isomorphism but also as a mimetic isomorphism with a goal of achieving mimetic processes by learning from "the others".

However, within the Nav discourses, there also seem to be a category of work that "scored few points", namely, social work done with clients, especially those requiring more than short-term assistance involving complex issues beyond the scope permitted by bureaucratic clarity (Røysum 2014; Hanssen et al. 2015). This may be one reasons account for a "we" versus "them" dichotomy reinforced by ritual mechanisms expressing that "we have our own moral perspective" and "we have a special function". One might argue that social workers in so doing were "hiding behind" the symbol of the needy and complex client in their efforts to maintain their positions. However, this could also represent a response to their concerns about their profession identity, expressed by creating a product through common interpretations and symbols based on normative isomorphism. This could be understood in the sense that this represents a means for dealing with uncertainties related to Nav as a new organization as well

as those involving the pressure social workers experience on their professional aims to work with exposed and vulnerable clients.

How the social workers exercised their professional work in the light of their ethical principles may also be understood as reflecting the normative isomorphism operative during their incorporation into the Nav system. This could be seen as a response to the transition from the old to the new institutionalism: one understood by two sociologists as "from a normative to a cognitive approach to action: from commitment to routine, from values to premises, from motivation to the logic of rule following" (DiMaggio and Powell 1991, 19).

The study also suggests that social workers may be adapting their professional identities to the Nav system according to expected positions when negotiating their own subjective positions and associated ethical and pragmatic principles of their profession's discourse. It might be easier to "transfer" their professional identity to Nav as an organization by focusing on preserving its ethical values and principles as symbols of this occupational discourse. This finding is consistent with other research showing how the ethics agenda in social work can be co-opted into the service of NPM (Banks 2012).

### *Pragmatic and non-protectionist professionals (PPP)*

The social workers in the study created a product through shared interpretations and shared normative symbols. In this manner, the study revealed a relatively strong collective identity based on their professional ethics and the principles of social work. In the formation of their collective identities, these aspects provided strong guidelines as markers of identity, perhaps because the social workers had difficulties agreeing on or explaining what social work "is" in more theoretical terms. In referring to the ethical principles on which social work is based and to the fact that they as social workers were worried about their municipal social services clients, they expressed and maintained a collective "we". It is interesting that they were not trying to operationalize their professional identity more closely by increasingly clarifying and highlighting what social work as theoretical knowledge "is".

The study showed that the reality on the ground is complex and that bureaucratic clarity infrequently reflects the manner in which social workers traditionally work. Consequently, their practice takes on a distancing or alienating character in the Nav system. Social work as practice and knowledge then becomes a disadvantage in the Nav system where the main focus is on clarity and clear targets for client follow-up. Nav social workers may face challenges in expressing the content and substance of professional social work and this creates barriers for their abilities to articulate and to systematise their knowledge in a manner that makes it acceptable as "theory".

The social workers at the meeting did not seem to feel that it was important or appropriate to seek consensus on what social work is in order to help clarify the strengths they brought to the government side of the organisation and its staff. They appeared to be uncertain about what social work is, especially in light of the theoretical knowledge they could potentially provide and integrate into the Nav system. This study indicates that social workers had difficulties spelling out the specific methods they used in practice. This finding is consistent with other studies showing that social workers often experience uncertainty when seeking to describe their profession and this frequently results in putting them into defensive positions (Matthies 2013: Morris 2016). One can also argue that they toned down the theoretical aspect of the profession by saying that others could do social work just as well and that practising social work requires no special knowledge beyond caring about the clients' welfare. What they did as social workers was thus rendered invisible, which may have contributed to a weakening of their professional knowledge but also to social work as an invisible trade (Pithouse 1998). The findings are consistent with other studies that have shown that social workers consider their relationships with clients and the clients' trust much more important than any particular method (e.g. Perlinski, Blom, and Morèn 2012).

These factors contribute to transforming social workers into what I describe as pragmatic

and non-protectionist professionals (PPP), see figure 1. By this I mean that they deemphasise and render invisible the theoretical aspects of their professional practice by focusing more on the principles and practical value of exercising their profession. This *pragmatism* defined social work knowledge as comprised of those elements relevant for use in different client situations where the client´s best interest was ideally most important. Social workers thus became pragmatic in their efforts to safeguard and to remain focused on the best interests of the clients. In so doing, they appeared to be deemphasising internally the theoretical in favour of the principles and practical benefits of their profession, rather than *protecting* their professional knowledge. [Figure 1 near here]

One can say that the social workers I studied were more concerned about the ethical principles and the practical value of their work (how) than about the theoretical knowledge of social work (what). The motives of their job exist in the mundane work world (Pithouse 1998), but as social workers toned down their theoretical knowledge, some additional downgrading occurred in their combining of theoretical knowledge with experience and professional principles – especially in making discretionary judgements. As a result, and shown in Figure 1, the professional and expert knowledge involved in social work may become invisible, and degraded to "everyday" knowledge.

### *"Knowing how" as "what"?*
The study reflects how social workers connected their principles and values to their professional knowledge, but also to why they consider themselves to be unique. It is important that this knowing "how" in social work is at the fore of social work practice, especially because NPM and service marketization entail an expectation that workers are able to commit to the goals and ideals of their workplace over and above their professional values (Banks 2011; Hirvonen 2014). It may also be where their professional strength lies, even if it might be employed as normative pressure towards demands for increasing equality among the Nav employees.

One might question the conflict regarding whether social work is a rational-technical activity related to the new managerialism or a value-based, practical-moral activity. The knowledge focuses on knowing "how" what social workers do in practice, in addition to their principles and values, can be referred to as a practical-moral activity (Parton 2000). This knowing "how" is important because the structural function and idea of social workers as societal actors seem to be less well-defined than before. Individuals and families are still highly dependent on social workers not only to improve and protect their well-being – especially today where there exists increasing individualization of structural problems (Hasenfeld 2010).

This raises a key question about the traditional role of the social worker as a kind of mediator between the individual and society. This professional role may become increasingly difficult at a time when developments in social policy call for greater efficiency, increased workloads and often more standardisation of assistance. This is not new in the sense that the so-called modernization of the public sector for some time has threatened the value orientation of the profession as social workers steadily have been encouraged to hold administration/community interests above those clients (Lorentz 2001; O'Leary et al. 2013; Røysum 2014). One consequence of this development can be changed functions of social work practice from a need-led practice to more of a budget-led practice. This may account for the use of normative isomorphism by social workers in the study in an attempt to exert influence and bottom-up control within the Nav system.

Thus, in the process of promoting their professionals principles, the study found a lack of focus on theory in the participants' professional discourses. Social work is not only *one* practice but process knowledge, among other types of knowledge, based on each client's situation and context. Comprehensive knowledge and practice are central to social work and important for the understanding of the complexities of human struggle (Gray and Schubert

2013; Hanssen et al. 2015). The social workers may better integrate "how" and "what", and thus better promote and profit from the comprehensive knowledge use and creation in social work.


**Concluding remarks**

The data reported and the themes discussed are related to Nav offices and the conditions for frontline work considered as new methods of organizing the delivery of welfare policies as an activation policy project. The study indicates that the establishment of a holistic one-stop agency giving social workers substantial responsibility for finding individual solutions in combination with few exit options appeared to work against the practice of social work.

One can assume that an increased awareness of the theoretical knowledge in social work practice can help make the discipline easier to "sell" by making it more concrete and visible in adapting to new managerialism. This is important because NPM may result in re-professionalizing tendencies leading to the weakening of the individual relationship between service users and social workers. So the crucial question facing the profession today is how we best can integrate "how" and "what"? How can ethical principles and values be better integrated and made more visible into social work practice *as* theory? An increased awareness of the theoretical knowledge can arise by linking idealism and a view of human life within professionalism with the way in which social workers' knowledge is focused on "what" to do. Theoretical and factual knowledge require knowledge acquisition, i.e., knowing the what. When "how" might be described in a theoretical language based on theoretical knowledge, their *"knowing how"* can be a matter of "*what*". Hopefully this will make their professional knowledge more visible.

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[1] However, "social worker" is not a protected professional title.

[2] When I write about social workers within Nav, I refer to the Nav municipal social workers.

[3] The study conforms to internationally accepted and relevant professional ethical guidelines, and is approved by the Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD).

[4] All names of those who participated in the meeting are anonymous.