Social work epistemology in political contexts — historical reflections and future perspectives

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ABSTRACT

This paper highlights the particular challenges faced by academics when providing social work practice a scientific foundation. This discipline and profession deals with the nature and problems of social relations which are complex, context and culture specific and yet relate to universal regularities. By tracing key historical developments in social work theory, it can be shown that the political context in which theories emerge and to which they take position matters considerably so that principles like self-help or attention to diversity and personal identity can be interpreted quite differently. The paper focuses on the tension between objectivity and subjectivity as constitutive of social work epistemology, a theme that finds increasingly echoes in other disciplines, and concludes from latest 'post-humanist' theorising that in view of current global crises this tension needs to be maintained constructively in the interest of seeing individual social needs in comprehensive interactive perspectives.

KEYWORDS:

social work theory, social work history, Evidence Based Practice, user participation, post-humanism, global crises

INTRODUCTION

This paper, which is based on a presentation to a social work conference at the Czech Parliament on 4 April 2022 aims at giving insights into the specific challenges faced by social work practitioners and educators in assembling practice-relevant knowledge under current global social and political conditions. When personal social relations become problematic it concerns not just these individuals but invariably also involves issues in wider society. Social work interventions, therefore, need to address the intricate inter-play between psychological, social, cultural, economic, legal and political factors. This in turn requires corresponding epistemological considerations which relate both to the specific historical and cultural context which they address as well as to universal phenomena and principles. This dual orientation can best be studied and further developed from historical and international comparisons as will be attempted here.

Social work theorising faces this dual challenge of combining a universal with a context-specific and contingent dimension in unison with other academic disciplines. Gender issues, culture dependency and attention to ethnic specificity constitute challenges that are being also raised for instance in medicine. The whole notion of knowledge-creation as the prerogative of scientists is being questioned by models of user participation in response to the criticism levelled at professional expert

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1   The core message of the article was presented at the Seminar: Perspectives on Social Work — Prague 4 April 2022, held in the Parliament of The Czech Republic

systems as instruments of power over service users. More attention is being given to holistic and participative approaches to research and practice (e.g. Ridd et al., 2009; Engen, Nissen & Uggerhøj, 2019) which in turn makes the theory-practice relationship more complex. In the following it will be argued that social work's long history of engagement with these challenges and the variety of responses it has produced can be taken as an indication that the nature of what makes human relations "social" and the forms in which "the social" can be expressed and promoted changes with circumstances. This requires therefore a constant critical analysis of the correspondence between human needs and political structures according to the criteria of human rights and equality.

PARTICULAR FEATURES OF THE ACADEMIC DISCIPLINE OF SOCIAL WORK

Like other practice-oriented subjects, such as medicine and psychology, social work as an academic discipline developed in order to give already existing forms of practice a scientific grounding (Lorenz, 2006). Unlike such other academic disciplines, however, social work's field of application and practice is notoriously difficult to define (Payne, 1991). This field can neither be "society as a whole", which is the subject of sociology, and sociology tends to analyse and abstract from social processes rather than "treat" them, nor can it be "the individual person" whose behaviour can be understood and influenced by means of applying knowledge derived from the field of psychology. The task and mandate of social work is to promote "social change and development" as stated in the "global definition of social work"[2] and this means to understand and treat "the person in social contexts". The definition places social work deliberately in an "in-between position". In order to fulfil this comprehensive mandate social work educators and practitioners have to analyse the complexity of social relations without reducing these to one or the other theoretical perspective only, as if solving social problems was "only a matter of psychology (or of politics, economics etc)". This accounts for the frequently noted difficulty students — and also practitioners — of social work report as having when they try to explain to others what social work was "actually about". In dealing with complexity in an interdisciplinary way social workers acknowledge that people's living difficulties never occur in neat categories, economic, social, psychological, but in forms that are affected by all these aspects simultaneously in what has now been widely recognised as "intersectionality" (Almeida et al., 2019).

Social work of necessity therefore requires a complex and composite knowledge base that overlaps with and integrates knowledge from other disciplines. What is more, dealing with these diverse sources of knowledge through social work requires also attention to how they are embedded in specific historical, cultural and political

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2   "Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work." https://www.ifsw.org/what-is-social-work/global-definition-of-social-work/

contexts and how such knowledge has to be related to the actual situation of service users. This explains why the history of epistemology and methodology of social work is characterised by frequent paradigm changes and why the international exchange of social work knowledge is also not as straight forward as it is in other academic disciplines (Lorenz, 2006). The variety of professional titles and terminologies referring to social workers in different countries hints at this dimension of complexity. This does not mean that social work methods should be determined by the contingent organisational and socio-political context in which they operate but, on the contrary, that being able to take an autonomous and critical position towards these contexts on the basis of a broader international and scientific orientation is also a central competence requirement of professional social workers (Smith, 2020).

HISTORICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The special tasks this confronts the discipline with can be illustrated from a few key moments of the history of the professional development of social work. In most countries, including Czechoslovakia before and again after the era of Communism, social work developed out of the necessity of addressing and remedying the negative effects of capitalist industrialisation (Lorenz, 2007). Even in the context of prevailing liberal politics in the United Kingdom during the early period of industrialisation with their "laissez-faire" orientation it was recognised that leaving poor and destitute people to solve their problems entirely by themselves would ultimately de-stabilise the whole political and economic system (Woodroofe, 1966). This provided the scope and the impetus for initially mainly charitable organisations to concern themselves with the social problems of individuals and families who without expert help could not manage to make a success of living in such changed and challenging circumstances as dictated by industrialisation and capitalism.

While from an organisational point of view the social work mandate might have amounted to helping people to adjust better to the conditions of industrialisation, an observant and independent-critical analysis of the living conditions of the families of industrial workers, of orphans, of sick and disabled people, as became a key competence on training courses for early social workers, led to a much more differentiated "case work methodology" (Payne, 2005). On these courses, initially offered mainly on an in-service basis before external and eventually third level institutions adopted social work training (Burt, 2022), voluntary charity workers learned quickly that people show resistance towards following their good advice and adjusting to prevailing standards of "good behaviour" not because they were morally bad but because they did not have the necessary physical, mental and material means of living a different life. Their resistance showed an awareness that by being coerced to change their behaviour they would suffer a serious psychological loss of agency.

These insights, in combination with ethical considerations concerning the dignity of people who are in need of help and the growing insights into the underlying psychological preconditions for behaviour changes led to the development of the first theoretical social work theory and practice frameworks (Lorenz, 2008). They reflected the realisation that sympathy, good will and common sense were insufficient

and ineffective means of assisting people in social difficulties. Effective social work intervention requires fundamental knowledge of how social order can come about and be maintained under conditions of modernity.

Two broad theoretical action models that were developed around the beginning of the 20th century helped social workers to assume a recognisable professional profile and to become an independent academic discipline. Both models were based on the understanding that the key to overcoming social problems is not knowing how to steer people towards "better solutions" as proposed to them by experts, but to enable them to find their own solutions. At the psychological level this was the central message of psychoanalysis (Biestek, 1957; Hollis, 1964) and at the community level it was the message of social pedagogy or community education (Hämäläinen, 2003; Lorenz, 2008).

The success of these theoretical frameworks that came to shape the practice in practically all industrialised countries strengthened the professional status of social work and social pedagogy. Different forms of academic training became widely established as a precondition for carrying out these social interventions professionally. But this also led to a kind of blindness towards a new risk of scientific (instead of moral) authoritarianism that can arise when the principle of "helping people to help themselves" is being interpreted or being perceived as if people were being made responsible for their own improvement on purely psychological grounds and without regard to their individual or cultural preferences or indeed to the material circumstances in which they live.

In the context of a global call for making societies more democratic and equal after WW II and the defeat of Nazism, the "standard model of social work", presented in the categories of casework, groupwork and community work, was being promoted by the United Nations on the basis of several international surveys (Kendall, 1960). Many ensuing training programmes in Western Europe were staffed by US and British academics equipped with English-language textbooks or European scholars learned from them on scholarships to courses in the UK and in the USA (Payne, 2014). They promoted these models of social work as universally applicable, irrespective of other theoretical models that existed in many countries and that had greater affinity to their respective cultural and social traditions. The "standard model" was supposed to be scientifically neutral, in deliberate contrast to pre- or unprofessional versions of social work that stood under the ideological influence of churches, of charities or of political regimes like those of Nazism, Fascism or Communism to which a modern, enlightened, scientifically grounded discipline of social work wanted to take a decisive distance (Lorenz, 2006). Social work and social work education conformed with the prevailing "standard model of science" which was supposed to be value-neutral, universal and based on theoretical insights.

SOCIAL WORK MODELS BETWEEN UNIVERSALITY AND CULTURAL SPECIFICITY

But the claim to scientific neutrality and universality of Western social work was being severely challenged in the 1970s and 80s by a series of radical theoretical paradigm shifts. Feminists, black activists and representatives of disability groups

began to call upon social workers and their teachers to come out of their stance of neutrality and to become politically committed to actions that do not put pressure on individuals to adjust to the living and working conditions under capitalism but to engage actively in the fight against injustice, inequality and exclusion, effects that social workers were often inadvertently creating. Particularly in the English language scientific literature, models of radical social work (Bailey & Brake, 1975), of feminist (White, 2006) or black social work (Ahmad, 1990) were now proposed in ways that put scientific research and correspondingly social work practice in a clear normative perspective of rights and equality. Social work theory was now meant to support the struggle for justice in wider society, presaging the later Global Definition by IFSW and IASSW, and social work courses in many European countries adopted such value positions, for the rights of women (Collins, 1986), of people with disability (Beaulaurier & Taylor, 2001), of cultural and ethnic minorities (Dominelli, 1988) and eventually of minorities on the grounds of sexual orientation (Nothdurfter & Nagy, 2017).

THE RISE OF "EVIDENCE BASED PRACTICE" APPROACHES

But in many Western countries in the 1990s, such explicit political commitment by social workers caused a backlash from governments that were increasingly influenced by neoliberal economic and political principles. In the interest of economic efficiency and hence for the purpose of reducing public expenditure on welfare services (Fox Piven, 2015) these politics promote ideological frameworks in which only tangible, immediate and quantifiable changes in people's behaviour count instead of long-term projects aimed at the transformation of social structures (Spolander et al., 2014). These demands on social work educators led to a widespread fascination with "Evidence Based Practice" (EBP), a concept borrowed from medicine which says that actions by social workers should not be determined by the broad theoretical models that had so far underpinned social work training programmes but should be determined by "what works best" according to empirical research on a vast array of studies (Ziegler, 2020).

Consequently, social workers largely abandoned the concern with consistent theoretical frameworks with which to construct their practice methodology. These had previously meant that depending on the orientation of the school they attended, social workers had learned to conceptualise practice for example in a psycho-social, a behaviouristic, a systemic, a task centred or, more recently, a cognitive theory framework for social work. Now they were guided to proceed pragmatically for each problem area and to make use of platforms that reported on the effectiveness of different intervention methods for specific user groups, for instance the Campbell Collaboration (https://www.campbellcollaboration.org/better-evidence.).

THE POST-MODERN CRITIQUE OF "DOMINANT NARRATIVES"

This turn away from competing theoretical models was accompanied by the wave of post-modernism that swept the philosophical and sociological disciplines

(Matulayova & Musil, 2013). The post-modern critique of established theoretical models focuses on the power element through which these models claim to assert their respective superiority over other models — and hence over clients. Social workers were always sceptical of the power that their official role in society brought with it, inferior though this power might be compared to that of other professionals like doctors or psychologists. Post-modern approaches to methodology therefore seemed to address and justify this caution concerning the use of power. With unbiased selectivity and the pragmatic relativism that resulted in social work practice nobody could claim any longer to have found "the right method".

This post-modern development, however, accentuates the dilemma over professional accountability pointed out by those who are sceptical whether social work represents a profession at all. Social workers, particularly in the UK, came at times under severe criticism for having made wrong decisions with fatal consequences, for instance by not protecting children enough from harm, (Munro, 2011; Warner, 2014). They were told by government to sharpen their diagnostic competences to better spot warning signals of harmful behaviour by carers towards children and to orient their interventions on clear factual evidence and not on intuitive feelings or political ideologies. The criticism, however, operated largely with a very simplified view of social diagnosis that did not take account of the complexity of factors that account for risk in social situations generally and in those of child protection specifically. One of the leading experts on child care and protection in the UK, Eileen Munro, came out strongly against such simplifications and challenged the reductive use of objectivity in such difficult-to-assess circumstances (Munro & Hardie, 2018). This raised the question, against which kind of knowledge sources evidence and hence accountability were to be measured.

USER PARTICIPATION AND ITS IMPACT ON SOCIAL WORK METHODOLOGY

In this crisis of professional confidence, which characterised that period across many industrial countries that had become, in Beck's terminology, "risk societies" (Boyd, Beck & Shrader-Frechette, 1993), a new approach to arriving at practice-related theory offered new possibilities: The fundamental critique of the authoritarian, self-referential use of power by professionals, voiced increasingly by service user groups and particularly in the disability movement (e.g. Beresford & Croft, 2001), turned this challenge into an opportunity. Service users themselves, with their subjective view of their situation, but also with their life experience, which professionals usually did not have to the same extent, demanded to become involved in the decision-making process over the most appropriate form of intervention and hence in the development of research and teaching (Boone, Roets & Roose, 2019). User participation in several countries is now becoming a central requirement, in social work practice, in research and in education. These current trends are being investigated in an international project which analyses the various models in which the demand for user participation is implemented in 6 European countries (INORP — Management and Supervision in Social and Health Organisations, Faculty of Humanities, Charles Uni-

versity (cuni.cz)) There is growing evidence internationally that immediate personal life experience is a valuable and necessary source of knowledge and indeed of theoretical indicators and that this source needs to form part of the constitution of expert knowledge (Krumer-Nevo, 2008). User and survivor movements, while seeming to challenge the whole notion of professional expertise and which indeed started with a critique of authoritarian expert cultures, emerge on the contrary as inalienable partners in the establishment of democratic processes of professional accountability (Marshall & Tibbs, 2006; Smith, 2009) and of scientific research (Urek, 2017), with all the new complications this can again raise (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). Service users are therefore also increasingly becoming teachers on professional social work courses so that students learn from the beginning how to listen to these voices as part of their professional training (Stevens &Tanner, 2007). For instance in social work with people with severe disabilities or with dementia the concept of "assisted decision-making" is gaining wider acceptance (Donnelly et al., 2021) in line with the recommendations of the United Nations Convention on The Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (Keeling, 2017).

These developments bring many encouraging advantages, not least from the perspective of ethics when the application of a method without the consent of the person affected would constitute an affront to the dignity of that person. Assessing the situation and needs of a person according to positivist paradigms of objectivity bears the risk of turning the person into an object (Lorenz, 2016; Munro & Hardie, 2018). In addition, even in natural sciences such as physics, which deal with 'hard facts', the realisation has long been spreading that objectivity in the conventional sense cannot be achieved but that facts appear different according to the subjective conditions of the observer, as best illustrated in quantum mechanics (Ziman et al., 2005). But participation cannot be treated as a magic formula that neatly solves all dilemmas faced by social work educators and practitioners over the issue of accountability in diagnosis and methodology. When it comes to a situation where a social worker has to take the concrete decision whether to remove a child from a risky home situation, is it not necessary to resort to objective indicators? How can "reality" be conceptualised so that it has practical meaning for social work methodology in the future?

"EMBODIMENT" AS A NEW EPISTEMOLOGICAL TURN IN SOCIAL WORK

The latest proposals of epistemological paradigms in social work build explicitly on the messages derived from quantum physics and aim at a "relativist form of materialism" under the heading of "posthumanism" (e.g. Haraway, 1984; Braidotti, 2002; Barad, 2010; Wolfe, 2010). Their proponents launch a vociferous critique against humanism and what they call the "anthropocentric" treatment of all dimensions of reality, the social as much as the environmental, which they claim has resulted in domination and exploitation precisely through the purely instrumental use of rationality in decision-making (Webb, 2021). This post-humanism refrains from distinguishing between object and subject, nature and culture, feeling and thinking

and seeks to work with integrated perspectives that let knowledge "emerge" (Barad, 2010) in such a way that gives then specific voice to the repressed spheres of reality, above all to nature itself. This epistemological necessity is particularly evident in the looming ecological crisis that nature sets limits to our ambitions to control it. The late Bruno Latour proposes in "Agency at the time of the Anthropocene": "To be a subject is not to act autonomously in front of an objective background, but to share agency with other subjects that have also lost their autonomy" (Latour, 2014 p. 5). Nature teaches drastically through the unrelenting advance of global warming that humans have no ultimate control over it and this has serious implications for a new understanding of our modern preoccupation with agency and autonomy (McRaynold, 2018). These critical developments show that so far social work interventions were oriented in a too individualist and instrumentalist way on gaining "dominance" over problematic situations instead of seeing them in a holistic context (Webb, 2021).

OUTLOOK: RE-AFFIRMING THE SOCIAL DIMENSION OF EXISTENCE

These latest epistemological and methodological impulses, with all the scepticism with which they have to be regarded, signal above all that we find ourselves in a crucial period of general paradigm shifts. It seems that all of the conceptual certainties with which scientists had attempted to make sense of the world have either lost their validity or at least require fundamental revisions. The major global crises we are witnessing now, the environmental crisis, the Corona crisis and the Ukraine war, illustrate this state of bewilderment drastically. All the concepts and methods with which societies had hoped to secure personal well-being and peaceful coexistence have become doubtful and pose the uncomfortable questions: should we restrict the freedom of citizens more in order to secure a better general health status? Should we respond to military aggression with equal military means? And what are the principles over which the conflict has arisen? — The Cold War had been conducted on clear ideological lines, but the "ideals" that could resolve the current war, and also the ideals that could characterise a "healthy society", are not so easy to define and emerge only in fragments and are unlikely to result in a consensus.

This global situation poses a challenge for social work educators and practitioners that goes beyond the concern with specific social problems in as much as it questions the central mandate of this discipline and profession which is to promote the social dimension of human existence. In this situation, the realisation that none of our theoretical concepts have ever fully and adequately captured what "social" actually means can be taken as a constructive message. It indicates that the social dimension of our existence, what renders existence human, is asserting itself in constantly changing forms that nevertheless articulate common human needs. Evidence for this was provided for instance by the way the restrictions imposed on "social relations" during the current pandemic were perceived and responded to. The command of "social distancing" that was enforced legally during the Corona crisis spurred a new appreciation of immediacy and of being socially connected, and this in a much wider variety of forms (Aluffi Pentini & Lorenz, 2020).

Therefore, the social dimension of our existence is a work in progress — it does not happen spontaneously as some naïve idealists claim who shun "political interference" in their personal liberties, nor is it the result of political impositions of the nationalist and frequently racist kind that make social belonging dependent on "factual" criteria like ancestry or ethnicity. Social belonging cannot be "found" nor "engineered" but is formed in the myriads of personal and formal interactions in which humans connect with each other, helpfully or unhelpfully. In our moving towards each other and in our being repulsed by each other the boundaries between closeness and distance have to be constantly re-negotiated, as was demonstrated in connection with the "me-too movement" (Ford & Ivancic, 2020). This requires attention to the behaviour of individuals with reference to structural conditions like human and civil rights and material provisions that enable social relations in the first place. In tracing and interacting intricately with these processes, as social workers do, existing knowledge is used and new knowledge is being constantly created through these confrontations with changing political and structural conditions. And the analysis of these processes needs to be incorporated and developed on social work academic courses in order to connect methodology with wider social and political developments. The sensitivity towards these developments and also the recognition of vulnerability and fallibility will determine the future shape of accountable social work approaches.

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