From Object to Subject – paradigm shifts towards user participation in social work research

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Abstract

The development of social work as a profession and as an academic discipline is intricately bound up with the project of modernity and therefore with the ambiguity of furthering personal liberty on the one hand and increasing the technical means of controlling and oppressing people on the other. The natural science paradigm in knowledge production bears the hallmark of this ambiguity and social work as an academic discipline needs to be safeguarded against uncritical knowledge production geared solely at increasing the efficiency of interventions. Contemporary epistemological discourses, critical of reductionist positivism and advocating instead reflexive and inter-subjective forms of knowledge production, give social work the opportunity to contribute towards socially accountable modes of knowledge production from the rich experience of its history in which both sides of modernity were featured. It can thereby gain recognition in the wider academic community and amongst professions for its leaning towards participative forms of knowledge and community building.

While there might be an unresolved debate as to whether the project of modernity is definitely and irrevocably in crisis at the beginning of the new millennium (and it can be argued that it has never been in any other state than in crisis), the current state of modernity is definitely characterised by a deep sense of scepticism with regard to some of the core principles of modernity, such as progress, rationality and unity. Mounting environmental problems, the stagnation of comprehensive political visions like European unity, world peace, social justice, the transfer of centres of governance from established political structures to transient players in civil society, and in the

economic sphere the polycentricism of the *free market mentality* with the concomitant cultural relativism of more or less equally authoritative knowledge sources (exemplified by the plethora of sources of information on the internet) are phenomena that contribute to a widespread sense of disorientation and fluidity in contemporary societies (Bauman, 2000). Correspondingly, current academic debates (e.g. Hutton & Giddens, 2000) are ambivalent as to whether these changes can once more be brought in line with core values of modernity through a heightened effort to apply principles of rationality or more reflexivity, or whether one has to be resigned to scepticism concerning an ultimately unpredictable world that is running out of (central) control. And as with the origins of modernity, the ambiguity – or dialectic (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002) – of promises and threats associated with modernity becomes highly polarised: on the one hand the unpredictability of non-linear developments in society, politics, but also in the economy and even in science contains the potential for increased individual liberation and authenticity, generating new centres of power and authority through social movements and through individuals asserting their autonomy more confidently in private and public contexts; on the other hand phenomena such as the further weakening of established centres of power and the dissolution of boundaries, the fragmentation of traditional systems of belonging and of common values conjure up the growing threat of new forms of oppression from global commercial organisations, from terrorism, irrationalism and corruption.

These controversies over the significance and orientation of modernity are closely associated with changes in the prevailing modes of knowledge production. Towards the end of the last century a group of scholars in the field of science policy studies around Michael Gibbons (Gibbons et al., 1994) sought to identify the new trends as *Mode 2 knowledge production*, characterised by transdisciplinarity, heterogeneity and reflexivity combined with greater social accountability. This mode pays attention to the context of the application of knowledge and operates a novel form of quality control that includes a wide variety of stakeholders and emphasises the importance of reflexive processes conducted from a multiplicity of viewpoints (Hessels

& van Lente, 2008). It therefore corresponds to the fundamental shifts in the meaning of modernity, which can be summarised either as post-modernity, *second modernity* or as *reflexive modernity* (Beck, Giddens & Lash, 1994). These shifts amount to a de-differentiation of social spheres that operated hitherto within the distinct boundaries of state, economy and culture so that these boundaries have become increasingly *liquid* (Bauman, 2000).

Altogether, Mode 2 takes account of those changes and differs from Mode 1 by its *democratic* orientation; where the traditional paradigm had relied on the propositional knowledge production of privileged academic centres and their autonomy, the legitimacy of those established *seats of knowledge* is coming more and more under criticism for being unaccountable and often irrelevant. Practice orientation is taking on greater importance, both in terms of the rootedness of enquiries into *real problems* (and hence into needs, rather than into the problems as defined as such by academics) and in terms of the immediate use that can be made of them. Above all, Mode 2 science means, as Novotny puts it, asking the question in all areas of knowledge production, "where is the place of people in all our knowledge?" (http://helga-nowotny.eu/downloads/helga_nowotny_b59.pdf). These changes pose a considerable challenge to established academic disciplines, which while having always been practice oriented, had made knowledge generation the exclusive domain of experts who had the right to use their own parameters for what counted as practice-relevant. Medicine is one such example, where the paradigm of *established medicine*, with its distinct theoretical schools, which had determined the course of research and practice, is losing its monopoly and is giving way to *evidence-based* pragmatism (Duggal & Menkes, 2011). Economics is the latest victim of a widespread critique of its abstract self-centredness and hubris (where, however, it seems that evidence-based approaches have not yet taken hold).

These recent developments are having a great significance for social work[1], both in terms of the questions that are being raised concerning its genuine academic character and in relation to the validity of its mode of knowledge production. It can be argued that while social work as an academic discipline has always found it difficult to be taken seriously on account of its strong practice orientation, it now has a chance to contribute to the definition and development of new models of knowledge production which refer to the importance of diverse practice contexts and particularly to the role of service users. However, with all those changes and uncertainties, the role of *evidence* and of validity of research results becomes more acute and needs to be examined more closely before associating social work simply with fashionable trends. Social work can lead such developments precisely because of its concern for practice-relevant and ethically well-grounded knowledge.

Broadly speaking, the growing demand for more research efforts in social work (Fook, 2004) reflects two opposing trends, one that seeks to firmly establish an epistemology (with a corresponding research regime) that would represent the distinctness of social work as an academic discipline in its own right, largely based on the paradigm of positivism and corresponding to an affirmation of the *Mode 1* principles of knowledge production (Thyer, 1993), and one that emphasises the role of practitioners and of service users, often in collaboration, in the definition of research topics and the construction of practice-oriented knowledge that pays less attention to academic disciplinary or professional boundaries (Gray & Schubert, 2010).

The former trend is partly associated with the fact that social work has become established at the university level in more and more countries and has to *justify* its existence in the academic context through research methods and projects that are considered to be *scientific mainstream*, partly with the

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[1]   in this contribution the term 'social work' will be used in a generic sense, unless specified, to comprise also traditions of community work, social pedagogy and social care.

pressure from social policies that exhort practitioners to operate more with cost-effective intervention methods with clearly defined outcome measures. Thyer (1993 & 1996), one of the early and chief protagonists of empirical scientific research approaches to social work interventions in the English-speaking world, seeks to place the academic discipline of social work in line with the positivist-empirical research methodology which he considers constitutive for instance of modern medical practice. Reference is made to the electronic availability of a vast number of empirical studies in the fields of health, social welfare and criminal justice through the websites of the Campbell Collaboration (www.campbellcollaboration.org.) and the Cochrane Collaboration (www.cochrane.org) which should be consulted by social workers when making their assessments of intervention methods based on scientific evidence of their effectiveness in particular circumstances. Thyer argues that clients have a right to be offered effective treatment and that it should be the hallmark of professionalism to first resort to proven modes of intervention that achieve measurable outcomes before considering alternatives. He contrasts his avowed line of *realism* with that of social constructionism which, when it contests the existence of objective reality, he dismisses as being equal to *solipsism*, i.e. the position that knowledge outside one's mind is inherently uncertain (Thyer, 1995). The importance of empirical evidence would however necessitate a considerable increase also in experimental research of which a study of US doctoral theses from 1998 to 2008 showed still relatively little sign (only 7 per cent), although quantitative research designs outnumbered the qualitative ones by double (Maynard, Vaughn & Sarteschi, 2012).

The trend showing the characteristics of Mode 2 knowledge production in social work takes a variety of different forms, as can be expected. In this line of development the *respectability* of social work as a discipline and the corresponding research approaches are being sought not with reference to established natural science paradigms but through a concentration on the particular characteristics of the social work mandate, including its ethical principles (England, 1986). These emphasise the dignity of the person and the reference to human rights, which should be upheld not just in practice

but also in research. While this concern has influenced social work approaches practically since the beginning of its quest for professionalization, the implications for research, which are indeed radical if applied consistently, have only recently gained prominence (Shaw, 2008) in the context of the wider social, cultural and political changes referred to above.

While the contrast between social work as science and social work as *art* referred to rather incompatible paradigms of epistemology some decades ago, the gulf between both does not seem to be narrowing. New social movements have contributed significantly to the change in perspective in the relation between experts and service users, between professionals and clients, between expertise based on academic training and expertise based on direct personal experience. Feminism, for instance, asserted the right of women to define their position and their demands for recognition on their own terms, particularly with regard to issues of health, social status and work. Ethnic minorities through the civil rights movement challenged the patronising condescendence associated with *tolerance* and charitable compensation schemes and claimed instead the right to self-determination and the recognition of *difference*; they identified and resisted the various overt and indirect pressures exerted on them to assimilate to majority values and habits. And similarly the disability movement, spearheaded by *People First*, declared people with disabilities as the actual protagonists of any campaign for change as the true experts in matters of their needs and demands. The new social movements also brought the role of volunteers and indeed of users themselves or potential users of social services more directly into play, no longer as inferior recipients of instructions or advice but as protagonists of (self-help) interventions. They define their priorities often very differently from professionals and challenge the power positions from which they were being *categorised* and *processed*. This threatened to undermine the claim to restricted professional expertise and exclusivity of knowledge on which the power of modern scientists and professionals was founded and also the expansion of social services but it also opened up new

forms of participation and collaboration (Beresford, 2007) and with that a new version of professionalism.

These developments therefore constitute both a very particular challenge and an opportunity for social work, given its alleged state of *incomplete professionalization* in comparison to other established professions like psychology or medicine. The crucial question is, does the greater openness towards new ways and new sources of knowledge production hinder the process of professionalization in social work and even spell a relinquishing of accountability according to established scientific criteria and practices, or does it on the contrary make the profession more accountable because of its readiness to involve service users directly in the production of practice-relevant knowledge?

Modernity meant above all the total transformation of social relations in terms of what Giddens (1990) calls a process of *disembedding*, i.e. the questioning and dissolving of *taken-for-granted* relations at all levels of society and their complete re-structuring according to new, *modern* principles. These principles were on the one hand aimed at ensuring greater personal freedom and autonomy, emphasising the right to choose marriage partners, religious and political affiliations and careers, on the other hand they represented new *necessities* such as the rationality of purposeful actions in economy and bureaucracy (Weber, 1947). The potential for autonomy and emancipation therefore stood directly in opposition to new forms of domination and oppression; science and technological progress played a role in both advances that had a liberating effect in medicine, for instance, or new instruments to spare people hard labour and to facilitate transport and communication, but also in promoting industrialisation with its de-humanising aspects and modern forms of warfare and political control (Hobsbawm, 1996).

The search for reliable and useful knowledge played a key role in the technology areas as much as in social sciences. In the course of radical changes in social order, individual life choices had to be brought in line with *the common good*, which meant with objective, impersonal criteria and

arrangements that can determine the structural basis of society and secure the stability of social relations. Therefore, the interplay between structure and agency became a dominant theme, not just in the emerging academic discipline of sociology where it concerns social scientists to this very day, but also in the design of social services and in the shaping of corresponding methodological and professional approaches.

Early sociologists like Comte, Durkheim or Spencer were primarily concerned with this question and investigated the structural side of society. Their methodology oriented itself on the successes natural sciences had begun to demonstrate through the use of *positive*, i.e. objectifying research methods that established causal regularities and hence laws of nature by means of deduction. Empirical findings secured their status of objectivity by deliberately distancing observers from the objects of observation. Just as progress in medicine, in industrial and military technology, in agricultural food production and also in bureaucratic administration had helped to establish the natural science paradigm as the hallmark of modernity and the motor of progress, so these sociologists presented their *laws of society* as a means of revealing the secrets of the structure of societies and saw in that the means of improving their functioning.

But this was not the only way of establishing the scientific status of sociology. Placing this discipline in the tradition of historical and humanistic sciences with their emphasis on the methodology of hermeneutics, the sociological school according to Max Weber (1975) declared inter-subjective processes of understanding (*verstehen*) as a more appropriate way of capturing what factors account for the integration of societies. Human beings are capable of attributing meaning to their actions and this cannot be represented in statistics but only in archetypical social behaviour patterns that are subject to continuous modifications.

The contrast between agency and structure is also reflected in the divergent pathways into knowledge production in the early phases of the professionalization of social work. The earliest textbooks in social work simply gave examples of good practice and intended to derive from them a

specific methodology of case by case intervention, namely that of casework, (e.g. Bosanquet , 1914). The emerging profession was engaged in *learning by doing* and genuinely devoted itself, at least where it was professionally and non-judgementally oriented, to getting to know the concerns of *ordinary people* who largely occupied a world completely different from that of the helpers. The professional intention was to thereby stimulate and support the agency of the recipients of help and to foster their autonomy. This concern for agency and immediacy can be found in all strands of this diverse profession, in casework as mentioned, but also in community work where the concept of *settlements* stressed the importance of living and working amidst *the people* and sharing their daily experiences more immediately than the occasional visits to problematic neighbourhoods would otherwise permit (Shaw, 2008). And more generally, social pedagogy in the ideas of key promoters of this methodology and the ensuing movements, like Pestalozzi, Wichern, Fröbel and Salomon developed a distinctly modern role; it promoted the social integration of people threatened with marginalisation by challenging the oppressive *educational regimes* as practised within the institutional framework of the school or the residential home to promote autonomy and self-responsibility in the learner over the entire life-cycle. So while paying attention to the actual life circumstances and needs of people caught up in the profound transformation processes at the time, the social professions also assumed a role that went beyond the immediate situation of need and helped to define the modern concern with the creation and the shaping of *the social sphere*. Moreover, they did so not by translating abstract scientific theories to practice but by constructing their methodology from daily experiences, albeit with reference to *science* in the form of systematic enquiry.

These early social workers contrasted their *modern* approach to charitable assistance with that of traditional *almsgiving* based on benevolence and wanted to pursue an educational programme that induced conformity with rational, sensible criteria of behaviour. The motto was to give only *organised* charitable assistance as represented by the Charity Organisation Society, one of whose founders wrote, "charity is not spasmodic, casual and emotional,

but, like science, an all-observing, all-comprising intelligence. It is not antagonistic to science; it is science – the science of life – in operation – knowledge doing its perfect work" (Charles Loch, quoted in Timms, 1968, p. 59). The ability to recognise the dignity of human beings as authors of their decisions marks indeed the beginning of professional social work approaches in distinction from the moralistic and patronising attempts by charity workers to prescribe socially approved forms of behaviour to their clients in return for receiving material assistance (Peel, 2011). In that first phase of professionalization, it was realised that treating people merely as objects and manipulating their behaviour, even for a *good cause*, was not only ethically unacceptable, according to Kant's Categorical Imperative, but also did not produce lasting effects in terms of an increase in competence and responsibility on the part of the recipients. Reflections on such observations and a turn towards a detailed analysis of practice experiences marks social work out as an agent of modernity and enabled it to put pre-modern charity attitudes and approaches at a clear distance.

The realisation of the ineffectiveness of interventions that exercised manipulative moral pressure on people constituted the starting point for two methodological developments that were of lasting importance for social work's epistemology. One was critical of the *person-to-person* approach of casework as it could be seen as searching for the causes of impoverishment at the personal level. In England, the Fabian Society advocated instead structural reforms based on the extensive poverty surveys by Booth in London and Rowntree in York (Glennerster et al., 2004). Their results from large-scale quantitative data, gathered in the working class areas of these big cities, demonstrated that poverty was not a consequence of imprudent individual behaviour but of inadequate income, housing and work opportunities. Casework was accused of ignoring these structural *facts* and hence of *blaming the victims*, at least implicitly.

This opposition had an immediate effect on the early training programmes in both the UK and the USA. Where these had until now consisted largely of *on the job courses* for volunteers of the COS to improve their *family work*, they

now took on an academic character with the founding of the London School of Economics (1905), a foundation of the Fabian Society, and various academic schools in the USA in affiliation with universities such as Michigan and Columbia. This meant that training assumed a decisive social science orientation in affinity with the newly established academic discipline of sociology in its *structural* orientation and confronted practitioners with political issues of inequality and a commitment to social reform while at the same time paying attention to individual situations of need.

The second line of development towards a scientific basis of social work concerned interventions at the personal level. In view of the *resistance* clients showed towards *good advice* the advances of psychoanalytic insights into the unconscious mind helped to explain these reactions and to interpret them no longer as *moral deficits*, like lack of gratitude or moral weakness, but as common psychological reactions that had origins which fitted a scientific theory (Hollis, 1939). This helped to establish the reputation of casework in close proximity to therapy, particularly in clinical settings like the Child Guidance Movement.

Both these scientific paradigms which formed the lasting basis for social work training, the social science frame and analytic psychology, operated with the notion that the causes of problems could be established objectively. Nevertheless, the application of these scientific principles in concrete situations of intervention always required the simultaneous attention to and recognition of the element of human agency. The early textbooks of social work by Mary Richmond (1917) and Alice Salomon (1926), characteristically called *Social Diagnosis* with reference to the role diagnosis played in modern medicine, tried to combine the objectivity of a comprehensive collection of data as they described a person's circumstances with the concern for the subjective meaning clients attribute to their circumstances. There was, however, always the danger, particularly with the models of the unconscious mind supplied by psychoanalysis, that the professional would understand their clients better than they themselves were able to and that thereby an element of *objectification* dominated the professional relationship.

Relationship, like *evidence* became thereby key terms in the social work methods repertoire that encapsulate the typically modern ambiguity of the search for objectivity and at the same time the need for the subjective endorsement of the validity of any knowledge gained concerning a particular life situation.

This schematic portrayal of early approaches to research and theory formation in social work highlights a fundamental dilemma that permeates social work right to the present. On the one hand, it considers its mandate to be that the professionals should come close to the social concerns of their clientele and their subjective interpretations as the key to understanding the individual situation. The symptoms of *social problems*, in contrast to medical or psychological difficulties, do not manifest themselves in categorised form of distinct diseases or behavioural deficits, but have an undifferentiated *lifeworld* character, that also needs to be approached in lifeworld manner. This means for knowledge production in social work that the distinction between *objective knowledge* and *context* is simply not possible and that social work research needs to always be related to both.

It is from this historical and fundamental perspective on the nature of social work that the current crisis in knowledge production becomes a highly relevant topic for social work. In this crisis, it is indicative that the question of accountability is becoming more acute. Professionals come under more public scrutiny, resources have to be applied more efficiently and the voice of the service user cannot be ignored any longer, and this is across all professions. However, the manner in which that voice is being heard and in which it influences professional forms of practice needs to be examined very carefully, in relation to both research methodology and models of practice. More specifically, the issue of participation in both contexts reconfigures a fundamental dilemma of modernity, namely that between technical feasibility and ethical responsibility. Social work has a prime responsibility for holding both those aspects together and for thereby enhancing the liberating potential of modernity and safeguarding particularly vulnerable

members of society against becoming objects of technical manipulation and oppression (Otto, Polutta & Ziegler, 2009).

The danger of such *objectification* arises not just from explicit political ideologies as was the case for instance under Nazism in Germany, but also from the apparent *rationale* of dictates of efficiency and effectiveness as they are currently dominating the organisation of social services. It is an awareness of such dangers that the concept of *evidence based practice* in social work needs to be examined carefully and critically. Without taking into consideration the political context in which the costs of social services are being portrayed as an unnecessary burden on society and in which the dictates of the market, introduced progressively into social service management through privatisation, are being seen as self-evident and beyond discussion, the orientation towards evidence based practice can easily become an instrument of subjecting users of social services to that regime.

Social work in the light of its history and its important position as a modern profession has therefore the responsibility to maintain and develop further a critical stance towards the use of *evidence* and more generally of scientific research conducted in a manner that treats people as objects (Mullen & Streiner, 2006). There is no research method or school of epistemology that offers an *ideal solution* to the dilemmas posed in the ongoing social transformation processes. Both the reference to objective, structural conditions that impact negatively on people's well-being and the reference to their right to give subjective meaning and to show agency in the light of those structural determinants have their justification in a project of *society building* that is the ultimate challenge of modernity.

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